



Turn Twelve Steps into 26.2 Miles

Here's why training for a big race can be good
for your recovery in the long run. *by Jennifer Chesak*

"You just gotta show up." That's marathon runner B.J. Swenson's mantra for success. "I was willing to do what people suggested," he adds, "when it was snowing, raining, when life sucked."

Swenson speaks not only of crossing the finish line of a 26.2-mile race—the distance of a full marathon—but also of sobering up and staying clean. Sweat and sobriety have gone hand in hand for him while in recovery at the Denver Rescue Mission, a treatment facility that offers activity-inspired rehabilitation methods including marathon training.

A Change of Pace

Another resident at the Mission, Brandon Najera, says endurance training exposes you to positive influences. Because completing a marathon requires about 18 weeks of dedicated training, participants who run with a local group often find themselves making long-term friends and creating new support systems. Whether training while in a recovery program or as a goal set post-treatment, the opportunity to be surrounded with other health-minded individuals is invaluable. "You get out there in an environment with people that are goal driven," Najera says. "You're not around people that are using."

Also helpful is the process of setting a goal and going after it full throttle—something many in recovery haven't been able to do in the past. "I realized if I was going to do things differently, I was going to have to make changes," Swenson says, thinking back to a major relapse. "I hadn't really stuck with anything before."

Committing to a long-term project such as marathon training can help keep your recovery on track as well. "Finishing any goal gives you a realistic look at what it is like to take on another goal," Najera says. "For me, I've been able to achieve more in the past eight months than I have in the past seven years. Plus, the natural high is better than any drug."

Marathon running isn't a simple endeavor; only one-tenth of 1 percent of the world's population complete one. That exclusivity is part of the lure for some maintaining sobriety. Nick Sterner, a former resident of the Mission and the man partly responsible for its program to turn Twelve Steps into 26.2 miles, sites the statistic twice a year to new residents in an effort to recruit trainees.

Sterner, who battled drug addiction in young adulthood, knows firsthand how the running and racing process can save lives. Rather than complete a formal treatment program, he traded one addiction for another and immersed himself in training.

Sober life was going well, except for one thing. His son, Nick Jr., had hooked up with a family that manufactured meth. He was out on the streets, and Sterner had no idea where. "I would build looking for Nick into my running schedule," Sterner says. Unfortunately, those routes literally led him down the wrong path, and Sterner once again turned to drugs. "I had been drawn into the vortex of the abyss."

Sterner managed to find a way to the surface and pull out his son with him. The two of them entered the Denver Rescue Mission. "I never would have done an alcohol and drug program," he says. "I went there for my son. It hit me that I really need to take my time, take myself off the tracks. I set out to save my son, but it was really him who saved me."

Run with a New Pack

After detox, Sterner, a marathon veteran with 12 races under his belt, was eager to get back to his healthier lifestyle. He began training for the Colfax Marathon, ran that and then trained for the Denver Marathon. Intrigued by his efforts, the race directors of the Colfax Marathon approached the Mission with the idea of a group of runners in recovery training for the race. In 2007, Sterner launched the Activity Inspired Rehabilitation Foundation

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“ At first, running a half a mile seems impossible, but it’s about getting out there and the confidence you gain completing that goal. ”

Fit to Race?

Along with the psychological boosts of earning a marathon medal come the obvious physical benefits. Training to cross the finish line helps you effectively manage weight and maintain a healthy heart. But starting a marathon training program after years of alcohol or drug addiction requires a few precautions. Substance abuse can do a number on the body, so runners in the Denver Rescue Mission must go through a 30- to 90-day purification

(AIR), to help address homelessness and addiction through endurance running programs that foster a positive connection with the community and support goal setting and achievement.

So how does Sterner convince new residents that running a marathon will change their lives? “I tell them the same thing I told my son,” he says. “You can go through another program in 15 years or you can connect with something now. At some point you’ve opted out of society, and here’s your chance to opt back in and believe.”

The end goal, Sterner says, is to teach recovering addicts that they are part of a community and to dispel the notion some might have of being outcasts or the black sheep of society. A race takes away the stigma associated with recovery that people sometimes feel. “When you line up at a race,” Sterner says, “you don’t know who the guy is next to you, but you have one common goal: finishing. The only thing that makes [our runners] different is that they have completed something amazing.”

GETTING STARTED

Best Foot Forward:

Specialty running stores can give you a gait analysis and fit you with a proper shoe to help you avoid injury.



What Not to Wear: Avoid cotton T-shirts, as they don’t allow sweat to evaporate. Opt for wicking, technical fabrics that will keep you cool and dry in hot weather and warm and dry in the cold.

Do the Gu: For long runs, which you’ll need to do at least biweekly and often weekly, you’ll need to ingest carbs on the go. Gu gels are easy to carry and available at athletic stores.



Find Your Stride:

If you’re not training with a coach or a group, you can download a customizable training program at runnersworld.com.

program. “It’s very overwhelming at first because we aren’t the healthiest,” says Najera, who has now completed two half marathons and is currently training for a full. “At first, running half a mile seems impossible, but it’s about getting out there and the confidence you gain completing that goal.”

It’s important that anyone considering launching a marathon training plan consult with a health professional. After getting the green light, just show up and run, as Swenson did. He showed up for and completed the Colorado Marathon on Mother’s Day in 2010. His grandmother and mother were there to cheer him on. Since then, he’s finished four additional marathons and one half. He now pays it forward by working for Urban Peak, a nonprofit organization in Denver, where—with the help of Sterner’s AIR Foundation—he helps train at-risk youth to run. ■

Jennifer Chesak is a Chicago-based freelance writer specializing in lifestyle, adventure and health topics. When she’s not tethered to her notepad, she’s off training for her next marathon.