

One man's sure-fire strategy for a healthier lifestyle.

By Rick Maier

For years I tried a variety of exercise programs, but nothing worked. I'd join a fitness club, go faithfully for the first few weeks, then come up with one excuse after another until I stopped going altogether.

I bought a couple exercise machines thinking that I would work out more at home, but within a few weeks they became dusty storage racks. Spending money just didn't help me get in condition.

One day it dawned on me that my favorite business strategies – measure and reward – might also work on fitness. It's a simple formula: define the goal in very measurable terms, track your progress, and create a very positive image in your mind of what success looks like.

The gyms and home equipment failed on all counts. 'Getting in shape' was too broad a goal, the workouts were too painful and boring, and I didn't have a clear image of a highly motivating end state. Plus, there was little accountability, and lying to myself just added to the stress.

Then a friend encouraged me to run in the Labor Day Road Race (LDRR). It changed my life. I could measure my training times and distances, and the thought of finishing a 3.1-mile race, when all my life I thought running was for crazy skinny people, appealed greatly to my competitive nature.

Motivated by images

The first few workouts were not much fun, but the images kept me motivated. My legs and lungs tried to convince my brain that I just wasn't built for running, but I stuck with it. Going a little farther each time was very encouraging.

I used the telephone pole technique for starters – run to the first pole, then walk to the next; next time, run the distance between two poles, and so on.

You learn all kinds of things about yourself, like what to eat and drink during training, and the types of clothes to wear. Running or just comparing notes with friends provides the needed accountability.

I'll never forget the exhilaration of joining hundreds of other runners and walkers for the start of that first 5K Labor Day race. I knew to watch my pace, but the adrenaline rush and downhill start pushed me to run a personal best time for the first mile of the race.

The hill at the St. Paul Apartments is a challenge, and some people started walking, but I was determined to finish in less than 26 minutes.

Well, I finished in under 24 minutes (not fast, but I was proud), and felt like a million bucks at the finish. I then began running every race I could find (don't quit after Labor Day!).

Longer runs followed

5K races led to 10K events, which led to half and full marathons. Years later my congenital bowleggedness contributed to knee problems and I transitioned from running to bicycling, but the majority of runners can keep running all their lives.

You don't have to run the whole race, you can walk. Don't worry how you look – wear a baseball cap, but smile for the cameras near the end. And you'll be home by 10AM to enjoy the holiday. Look for your time in the Telegraph the next day.

The LDRR event has it all – well organized, big enthusiastic crowds, competition at all levels - and of course, measures and rewards. The entry fee goes to charity and you'll get a really cool T-shirt, thanks to some generous sponsors.

Don't wait until August to begin training for the big race. Get out there now - three times a week. Get up at dawn to avoid the heat. Race day is just the destination; the real benefit is the journey – the months of training.

Once you start running several miles a week, you'll lose inches and pounds, be able to eat more, and feel perkier all day.

The key is to make a commitment and get started soon. After you are addicted to being in condition, *then* you'll use the fitness club and home equipment to cross train and workout when you can't run outside.

Come on Macon! Start training for Labor Day now and I promise that you'll be a new person. See you on September 3!

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