

## The Fleeting<sup>1</sup> Benefits of Marathon Running

In the weeks ahead, about 75,000 Americans are expected to participate in some of the nation's largest marathons – in Chicago this Sunday, and in New York City and Philadelphia next month. But it's far from clear whether the marathon boom of recent years has provided much benefit to public health.

Fitness and dietary experts say marathons increasingly are the exercise equivalent of crash diets<sup>2</sup>, with similarly disappointing results. There's no evidence that running a marathon leads to lasting weight loss, marathon researchers say. And it's unknown how often such runs initiate or perpetuate a lifetime of steady exercise. Indeed, in a long-term fitness sense, marathons are really sprints<sup>3</sup>; the true marathon is the exercise program that lasts for decades, fitness experts say.

'If the marathon movement really got people at large<sup>4</sup> to exercise, we wouldn't have the problems we do as a too-sedentary nation,' says Steven Blair, a veteran marathoner and professor of public health at University of South Carolina.

Bookstore shelves are packed with tomes<sup>5</sup> on how to run a marathon, and training groups have proliferated. The number of marathon participants crossing the finish line in America keeps rising, jumping 3% in 2008 to a record 425,000, according to Running USA, an industry-supported research center in Colorado Springs.

Yet a large percentage of runners who complete the 26.2-mile races fail to match the persistence of John Craddock, a 61-year-old author and book packager in Winter Park, Fla., who has never run farther than six miles at a stretch<sup>6</sup>. Since 1972, however, Mr. Craddock has been running two to three miles about five times a week, meaning that about twice a month for 37 years he has completed the equivalent of a marathon. 'I never miss more than two days in a row – ever,' he says.

Of course, fitness is only one measure of marathon success. At sites such as Marathonguide.com, contributors tell compelling stories about the psychological, emotional and social benefits of marathon running. In his new memoir, *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*, Haruki Murakami describes marathon running as invaluable to the writing of his novels.

Without question, participants who remain steady runners after finishing a marathon enjoy seemingly impressive benefits. Continuing scientific research suggests that consistent long-distance running not only improves cardiovascular health – a well-known benefit – but also lowers the risk of disorders of the eye and prostate, among other organs.

Still, even as the medical case mounts for people to get more vigorous exercise, behavioural studies are showing that hard-to-sustain regimens and painful routines can diminish the will to work out. Increasingly, public-health officials are questioning the value of the so-called boot-camp<sup>7</sup> approach to working out. 'The best can be the barrier to the good,' says Heather Chambliss, a University of Memphis professor specializing in exercise motivation.

Marathoners represent only a small fraction of the nearly 15 million frequent runners in the U.S. The most popular race is the largely unheralded<sup>8</sup> five-kilometer, or 3.1-mile, run, which accounted for nearly 40% of the 8.9 million people who finished official races in the U.S. in 2007, according to Running USA.

Mike Burns, a frequent runner in Kansas City, Kan., says he was tempted by the marathon boom. But the 53-year-old insurance agent says he finds that any effort he makes to go faster or farther diminishes his love for running. 'After a hard one, I wake up the next morning thinking, "Do I have to do that again?"' he says. So, Mr. Burns logs<sup>9</sup> five four-mile runs a week, a routine he has maintained since the end of his college basketball career in 1978.

Marathon running also might not be effective at keeping weight off, as many participants hope. That's because runners sometimes continue eating at high-mileage<sup>10</sup> levels after crossing the finish line. 'Women come to me all the

1. **fleeting:** passeggeri, a breve termine.  
 2. **crash diets:** diete intensive.  
 3. **sprints:** (fig.) faticate.  
 4. **at large:** in generale.

5. **tomes:** libri.  
 6. **at a stretch:** di seguito.  
 7. **boot camp:** centro di addestramento reclute.

8. **unheralded:** poco noto.  
 9. **logs:** totalizza.  
 10. **high-mileage:** alta distanza percorsa in miglia.

time who have gained weight after running marathons,' says Dawn Jackson Blatner, a Chicago dietician and spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association.

In a sport where 40% of runners are first-time participants, most won't make a lifestyle out of running marathons, because of waning interest, a busy schedule or vulnerability to injury. 'A good number of runners do a marathon and don't come back to it,' says Ryan Lamppa, spokesman for Running USA.

Eric Zorn, a popular Chicago Tribune columnist, chronicled with passion and humor his training for the 1998 Chicago Marathon. Along the way he convinced scores<sup>11</sup> of other novices to follow suit<sup>12</sup>. But after three successful marathons, Mr. Zorn gave it up, and he eventually regained the 40 pounds he'd lost. Now, he barely runs at all. 'I'll bet I didn't run 26 miles this whole summer,' says Mr. Zorn, attributing that to injury and disinterest.

Kevin Helliker, *The Wall Street Journal*, October 6, 2009

11. scores: tante.

12. to follow suit: fare lo stesso.

## ► Understanding the text

### 1 True (T) or false (F)? Correct the false sentences.

- |   |                            |                            |
|---|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Three of the largest marathons in the USA take place in New York, Chicago and Detroit.   | <input type="checkbox"/> T | <input type="checkbox"/> F |
| 2. There is little evidence that running marathons helps you to lose weight.  | <input type="checkbox"/> T | <input type="checkbox"/> F |
| 3. The amount of people running marathons is decreasing.  | <input type="checkbox"/> T | <input type="checkbox"/> F |
| 4. Consistent long distance running has many benefits.  | <input type="checkbox"/> T | <input type="checkbox"/> F |
| 5. Studies show that the effort required to train for a marathon may discourage people to continue running after the marathon.                                  | <input type="checkbox"/> T | <input type="checkbox"/> F |
| 6. The most popular race in the USA is the 6 kilometer run which is well known.   | <input type="checkbox"/> T | <input type="checkbox"/> F |
| 7. 40% of marathon runners are novices.   | <input type="checkbox"/> T | <input type="checkbox"/> F |
| 8. Many marathon runners do not compete in more than one marathon because they get bored quickly, are vulnerable to injuries and do not have the time to train. | <input type="checkbox"/> T | <input type="checkbox"/> F |

## ► Beyond the text

2 Why is this extract 'surprising'? Find some statistics in the text to illustrate your answers.

3 Which is the writer named in the extract? What do you remember about his attitude to long-distance running?