

The Art Of Group Training



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Kaidi Greiner was a cross country runner in high school. In college she was on the crew team. Athletic and active, Greiner was devastated when, two years ago, she experienced two herniated discs in her back. Her injury stopped the 24 year old in her tracks and she hasn't even tried to do anything competitive since. That was until a friend coaxed her into a group training for the annual Run the Bridge 10K over the Ben Franklin Bridge.

A self-acknowledged non-self motivator, Greiner soon embraced the idea of training with a group.

"I'm probably not going to follow a training program on my own, but with a group I am more motivated to keep going," says Greiner.



According to the American College of Sports Medicine, group training, especially for older adults, is a fun, motivating way to stick with a fitness routine. In addition to physical benefits, psychological and social benefits of group training have been cited, such as a heightened sense of well being and a companionship with fellow trainers.

Sarah Walmsley, vice president of marketing and referral relations at Excel Physical Therapy and Fitness in Philadelphia is the mastermind behind the group training for the annual Bridge Run. Beginning in August, her team created a 12-week training schedule designed for non-runners and those who were recovering from an injury and were ready to get back into running. To get the word out she created a group on Meetup.com and found that there was a lot more interest in the training than she originally expected.

“What I suspected was that there was a need in the city for people who wanted to train for a race but didn’t really know where to start,” says Walmsley. “What I found was a tremendous interest from people who were simply intimidated with the other running options out there. For someone who is starting from literally zero mileage, there is little support for them.”

One such individual was Roberta Santrock. An active walker, Santrock, 62, was a member of a walking Meet Up group. When it was disbanded she was contacted by Walmsley’s running Meet Up. Having never run before, Santrock was skeptical, but thought she might as well give it a try.

“Having a group there was an accountability thing,” says Santrock. “I’m much easier on myself than if someone else knows that I can do it.”

At the beginning of the 12 week training, Santrock was the slowest of the group, often losing site of the runners after just a few minutes. However she was never alone. Running coaches Walmsley and Lisa Fowler, also physical therapists with Excel, took turns jogging by her side, offering encouragement along the way.

“I was so slow it was really embarrassing, but I still went every week,” says Santrock.

The idea for the 12 week training program came to Walmsley after a discussion with the owners of Excel, Joe Ruhl and Jeff Ostrowski, about one of the core values of the company, which is to give back to the community by helping patients perform healthier and reach their maximum potential.

“Maximum potential doesn’t mean that everyone will one day be able to train for a marathon or a century bike ride, it means that every individual has the ability to perform at their best. Whether that’s walking up a flight of stairs or getting back into a sport that they love, everyone can achieve a physical goal. This training program was designed with this idea in mind,” says Walmsley.

Based on feedback from Excel personal trainers and staff who are experienced runners, Walmsley created a free booklet available to anyone interested in the training. Included in the booklet was race information, relevant articles written by physical therapists and fitness gurus and a training schedule and training log. Group runs led by trained physical therapists and fitness experts occurred on Kelly Drive on Wednesday evenings and Saturday mornings. Monday, Tuesday and Thursdays were individual workout days that incorporated at least 20 minutes of strength training and Friday and Sundays were rest days. With initial interest from 148 potential runners, the group thinned out to a core group of 50 runners who remained with the 12-week training program.

Race day occurred on Sunday, November 1 beginning at the Camden Riversharks stadium at the base of the Ben Franklin Bridge. 40 Excel runners, clad in bright orange t-shirts, huddled

in the chilly, damp weather before the beginning of the race to participate in a dynamic stretching warm-up, a technique that uses motion while stretching to warm up the muscles. With a nervous energy pulsing through the crowd, the Excel group made their way to the starting line.

Standing at the base of the bridge before the race was just the challenge that Excel runner Katherine Riepe, 25, had been seeking. Looking to get her first race ever under her belt, Riepe was also nervous, having never run further than five miles in the group training. That nervousness dissolved the instant the starting horn went off and the runners began.

“It was absolutely exhilarating. There were so many people running at different levels, but it was as if all runners were there to support each other. When the fast runners turned around and came back over the bridge in the opposite direction everyone was cheering for them,” recalls Riepe.

Like Riepe, Greiner’s goal was to just finish the race. Surrounded by their fellow Excel runners, both women succeeded.

“There were three of us and we pushed each other on the bridge and during the last mile. Since we had been training together for so long we were imagining where we were on Kelly Drive to gauge how much farther we had to go,” says Greiner.

Keeping in the group spirit, after finishing the race themselves, several of the trainers went back to find fellow runners and encourage them over the finish line. Accomplishing her goal of running the entire 6.2 miles, Santrock finished the race flanked by two of her trainers, who she now considers friends.

