

RUNNING RESOLUTIONS FOR THE NEW YEAR

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Runners are predominantly a self-disciplined group by nature, so the concept of making New Year's resolutions is a familiar one to those in pursuit of higher fitness. While the majority of Americans are now larger and less fit than the generations before us, the concept of making resolutions at the beginning of a brand new calendar year continues to remain stable. Promises to quit smoking, visit the gym, exercise daily, and strong-willed diet plans all burn brightly on January 1st only to somehow flicker away come February. Real runners understand that the act of heading out the door for a run is much more than simply a form of discipline or short-term sacrifice in preparation for bathing suit season. Rather, running and any other form of physical fitness is a lifestyle; a practice made perfect by a continued commitment to its activity. Yet even the most dedicated of runners would benefit from incorporating new resolutions designed to improve the mind and the body. Here are a few suggestions for those looking to better themselves this upcoming year:

DEVELOP A PLAN: Runners looking to improve their racing performance would benefit greatly by devising a written plan of attack. Many runners head out the door each day unsure of what type of workout they will be doing or why they should be doing it. If you compete, check out a 2008 road race calendar and begin to sketch out a rough game plan now. Be sure to highlight which races are most important since it is unlikely to maintain peak fitness for a 12 month stretch. Plan your training in phases and incorporate some specific workouts targeted for improvement at your important race distances. And remember that while it is important to avoid becoming a slave to a written schedule and to be flexible for life's distractions, planning for a specific race or races in the future requires a game plan in the present.

TRAIN WITH COMPANY: The "loneliness of the long distance runner" is predominantly a myth. Most runners enjoy the company of training partners and the benefits associated with training alongside other runners. There's also that added motivation to get out the door. You will certainly be much less likely to skip a workout knowing that others are out in the cold waiting for you, and when the challenge of New England's temperamental weather challenges us, it's comforting to know others are out there suffering right beside us.

VARY THE PACE: Many runners get caught up in the routine of running the same course at the same pace every time out. Scientific studies have clearly shown that fitness levels improve much more rapidly by training over varying distances at different levels of effort. Try incorporating training terms like "interval", "anaerobic threshold" and "recovery run" into your plan. You will recognize dramatic improvement in fitness levels as well as break up the monotony of your former routine.

RUN LONG: There is no greater fixture of a serious runner's routine than the long run. Long steady distance (LSD) builds endurance, strengthens muscles, improves running economy and efficiency, disciplines minds, and burns plenty of calories. There are all good things to a distance runner.

IMPROVE YOUR DIET: This one is tricky, especially for runners. I am a firm believer that running plenty of miles brings with it a sense of entitlement, especially when it comes to food. But even the most dedicated exerciser can benefit from slight tweaks in dietary habits. I'm not one to lecture on which foods are good and which are not, but simply making an effort to improve on nutritional choices will be beneficial for many reasons.

REST AND SLEEP MORE: Now were talking good news. Rest is a primary staple in any training plan; without it, the rigors of difficult training cause the body to breakdown and fitness levels to decrease. The best runners and coaches have excelled at the art of recovering from one difficult workout as quickly as possible in order to be able to tackle the next workout. The ability to effectively conduct a recover run (an easy effort at (65-70% heart rate effort) will pay dividends when it's time to tackle the next challenging workout.

CROSSTRAIN: The rigors on the body from running's constant motion can be minimized by building a stable and strong body. Cross training can develop non-running muscles, strengthen ligaments and tendons, and improve form and conditioning. Core exercises, strength training, Pilates, yoga, bicycling, swimming, stretching, etc. are just a few of the activities that directly impact runners and can added a much needed variety to your fitness routine. Find what works for you and what activities you enjoy most. Make them part of your routine.

Follow these seven basic guidelines and you should recognize success in the upcoming year. Best wishes for a happy and healthy 2008.

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