

THE JOURNAL OF NUCLEAR MEDICINE (ISSN 0161-5505) is published monthly by the Society of Nuclear Medicine, Inc., 1850 Samuel Morse Drive, Reston, VA 20190-5316. Periodicals postage paid at Herndon, VA, and additional mailing offices. *Postmaster*, send address changes to *The Journal of Nuclear Medicine*, 1850 Samuel Morse Drive, Reston, VA 20190-5316.

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Running Through Life

Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, people of all ages, from all walks of life, have been running or jogging fairly long distances on a regular basis. It has become a common sight to encounter men and women, alone or in small groups, dressed in running shorts, tee-shirts and running shoes jogging through downtown traffic or along a river walk or country lane. This activity not only confers a degree of health benefit on its practitioners, it also provides a sense of well-being, a sense of pleasure.

We have learned that in addition to improved muscle tone and cardiovascular fitness, jogging with a certain degree of effort can result, under the right conditions, in a release of endorphins, the body's natural opiate, which produces pleasure and tranquility, a state sometimes characterized as "runner's high."

For the past 20 years, I have been a member of this fraternity, this group who, in a manner bordering on ritual, regularly pull themselves out of bed, don the prescribed articles of clothing and set out to run just for the sake of running. There is no purposeful destination; the goal is simply to run for a prescribed time or over a predetermined route.

Occasionally, when in a new town or given a certain amount of freedom in the day's schedule, the run may have even less structure—neither predetermined time or course, simply jogging along wherever whim takes the runner. I remember spending a special Sunday morning exploring Palo Alto and Menlo Park in California this way, with the invigorating aroma of eucalyptus, the crisp blue sky and the fresh air that tasted almost sweet. There have been other memorable runs: around the grounds of the Louvre in Paris, along the Danube in Vienna, on the esplanade in Naples and in Tel Aviv to clear the effects of hours on an airplane. And there have been numerous runs with friends on Long Island or in New York's Central Park: 8, 10, even 15 miles on a weekend morning.

Even when running in an organized race, most of us do so without an expectation of winning or even a sense of competitiveness. Running is a simple, pure exercise with most of its adherents participating without prizes or scores. For those who want some competition, there is the concept of "personal best." How well did you do the last time on a particular course or specified distance? Can you beat your previous best effort? Are you as good as you could be?

How does one know how good one could be? Only by continual effort. And there are no shortcuts to improving. Better or more sustained preparation invariably produces better results. Even though the runner may be competing only with himself or herself, the discipline of the sustained effort enables one to go further, to explore new trails or neighborhoods, to experience the exhilaration of the day's adventure and to achieve a greater sense of freedom.

Perhaps there is a message in all of this for other activities, both personal and professional. There are times when the goal we have set for ourselves is beyond our level of preparation. This will produce only discomfort. We need to be realistic about our abilities, but we can attain more if we take the time and make the effort to better prepare ourselves. To achieve happiness, we need not better others or seek their approval; we need perform only for ourselves. The quality and intensity of the effort itself will be our reward. It will exhilarate us and provide gratification, just as it does for the runner.

Stanley J. Goldsmith
Editor-in-Chief, *The Journal of Nuclear Medicine*
May 1998