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Strength in Numbers

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Why more runners are seeking out training groups to keep them motivated and help prepare for their big races.

The popularity of distance running continues to grow rapidly, and if you or anyone you know has trained for a marathon, then you're talking about a select class of people: Only the top one percent of Americans has even attempted to complete a 26.2-mile race.

Often, though, it's not always the race itself that's the challenge; instead, it's the countless hours of training. While running alone for short distances is easy—and very refreshing after a stressful day—consistently going long on your own can be extremely monotonous and difficult. This is the reason why many distance runners are seeking out organized group training programs, be it for their first marathon or their 40.

If you're looking to tackle 26.2 this season, here's why you might want to consider joining an organized training group.

Social Aspect. Runners in general tend to be a social breed. Running increases your body's natural production of endorphins, which tend to make you happier and more energetic. What better way to meet other upbeat runners just like you than to join a group? For runners who are "single and ready to mingle," a group- training program offers the added bonus of potentially meeting that special like-minded someone.

Organization. In order to peak appropriately for distance races, your mileage needs to differ from week to week. If you don't have a GPS system to accurately measure your training routes, a good group program can ensure that you're running the appropriate distance for your long runs. Also, a program that sets out water and electrolyte replenishment fluids on the route will enhance your performance as well as simulate aid stations in a race. Some group programs also run from a variety of locations so you won't get bored with the same route every weekend. When you don't have to worry about the logistics, you can focus on training and just having fun.

The Mental Side. The thought of a 20+ mile training run can be very daunting for even the experienced runner—and doing it solo is even worse. Training alone for several hours can be incredibly boring and as soreness sets in most runners have a tendency to focus too much on their watch and dream of the comfort of their couch. Difficult stretches of training can be hard enough to make anyone question their dedication. But, having supportive training partners at your side to take your mind off the fatigue makes those tough miles feel 1,000 times easier, and the accomplishment of the finish is that much sweeter.

Coaching. For first-timers setting milestones with each additional mile or experienced runners striving to improve their race times, having knowledgeable coaches at every workout to answer questions is a tremendous asset. It's not only important to know what you need to do to prepare for your race, but to also understand why you need to do it so you can run your best, get faster and decrease the chance of injuries. If an injury occurs, good coaches should have a solid network of physical therapists, massage therapists, orthopedic doctors, etc. to tap into. Additionally, a coach that can build a personalized training schedule for your ability, goals and specific race is much more beneficial than following a "one-size-fits-all" model.

Pacing. One of the biggest mistakes runners make is going out too fast both in their training runs and on race day. Running alone can exacerbate this problem because of the tendency to just get the workout over with. In a group you can settle into a comfortable pace with others of your speed, which allows your body to warm up properly so you can train better, recover faster and enjoy yourself.

Accountability. There isn't a runner alive who hasn't questioned themselves at some point during their training. When those days sneak up on you and staying in bed sounds like the greatest thing since sliced bread, knowing you have a support system of training partners that are counting on you to be there will give you that extra boost to lace up your shoes and get out the door to meet them.

Support System. Running a full or half marathon is no easy task, even when everything goes exactly as planned. Unfortunately, injuries and burnout may occur and every runner goes through motivational valleys. There's nothing better than having a group of running friends to support you through the tough miles, keep your mo-jo going strong, and celebrate with you at the finish line.

Crossing the finish line in a marathon is a life-changing experience. However, it's not just the destination that counts, but the journey as well. Having a group-training program can make that preparation the best experience of your life culminating with the race itself. Distance running is an individual sport...but noone said that you have to train alone.

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