Most individuals would probably consider running to be an individual sport, but there is quite a social element to the activity, according to Keri Serota, co-founder and executive director of Dare2tri, a chapter of Disabled Sports USA. “I see more people running together.” For individuals with physical disabilities, she particularly recommends running with others in order to benefit from the knowledge and experience of those around you. “People don’t know what they don’t know,” she said. “I encourage those new to the sport to just ask. Often you will find that runners are willing to share information.”
GETTING STARTED

There are a number of reasons why folks choose to run. For some, it is a way to lose weight or improve their cardiovascular health. Others see the sport as an opportunity to provide a mental break while some runners simply enjoy being outside. Serota suggests each person has to determine what their motivation is.

If you have ambulatory challenges, running is going to feel awkward at first, according to Melissa Stockwell, a former Army officer and two-time Paralympian who co-founded Dare2tri with Serota. “It takes time to get used to it.”

Stockwell was the first female soldier to lose a limb in the Iraq War. She was medically retired from the military in 2005 and ran the New York City Marathon that same year. The Bronze Star and Purple Heart recipient is also a prosthetist and a USAT Triathlon coach who helps with ambulatory run clinics and camps. Her advice to new runners—start from the beginning. “You have to step out of your comfort zone.”

For individuals with a lower limb loss, the first thing you must do is determine if your current prosthesis is adequate or explore the possibility of running blades with your prosthetist. Stockwell suggests getting a “running-specific leg.” Prostheses can be custom-fit for different running styles and preferences, including sprint, endurance, terrain, etc. “My running leg is just a part of my world,” she said. “I love the sound of my foot hitting the pavement.”

WHERE DO I BEGIN?

Anyone interested in pursuing running should seek out guidance and expertise. Several DSUSA chapters, like Dare2tri, offer coached workouts or monthly clinics. They can also provide access to equipment, guides for visually impaired runners, and resources needed to take up the sport.

“If you have no equipment, we can loan you equipment. If you have no transportation, we can get you there. If you have no training, we have coaches. If you have no money, we have scholarships.”

If there isn’t a DSUSA chapter in your area, Stockwell suggests reaching out to a running club and inquire whether they have an adaptive component. She also echoed the importance of having a community to support your efforts.

“Meeting someone that might have a similar disability, watching what they do, and getting a feel for the sport goes a long way.”

For individuals who use crutches to participate in sports (“crutching”), a sturdy crutch with special grips as well as specially-padded gloves are necessary. Crutches with cork or soft rubber handles that prevent hands from slipping and powerlifting gloves are great options.

And finally, if you are thinking about getting serious about running, Balcom suggests getting the right running gear (clothing and shoes). “It makes life much easier and well worth the investment,” he said.

TAKING IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

The progression from running recreationally to competitively happens naturally for most, according to Serota. “You don’t go from the couch to the Boston Marathon,” she said. “It becomes addictive and then there is the realization that you are good at it.”

Knowing your skill level and taking small steps to get you where you want to go will lay the groundwork for success. You can find a coach or participate in a program that offers year-round practices that provides testing and feedback.

Stockwell, who won a bronze medal at the inaugural Paratriathlon event at the 2016 Paralympic Games and has her sight set on 2020, suggests being patient. “It doesn’t happen overnight.”

Balcom, who started running to lose weight and get into better shape, has developed into one of the top marathon runners in the country in the VI category. At first, he didn’t have any coaching when he started out (he does now). He is typically ranked first or second in the country in the T12 Paralympic category in marathons and anywhere between 9th and 13th in the world. He won a gold medal at the 2013 National Championship and won the 2015 Boston Marathon in his category. The following year he went to London for Team USA and finished 10th. “When I started, I didn’t know anything … I didn’t know even about the Paralympics,” he said. “I am still learning stuff.”

WHO IS NEEDED?

Visually impaired (VI) athletes should have a guide when they run, according to Don Balcom, a former naval officer and a member of the Southern Maryland Paralympic Sport Club. While in the Navy, Balcom was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa, a degenerative eye disease which has progressively deteriorated his vision. Balcom says some organizations provide guides, but typically the onus is on the individual athlete to find one. He resorts to using social media, contacting running clubs, and other avenues to locate individuals who can serve as a guide. “I typically have a new guide each time and I rarely meet the guide before I start a race.”

Both runners, the visually impaired athlete and the guide, must discuss the ways they are going to interact, including how to communicate, whether to run tethered or not, and other important topics. “I go through the plan ahead of time with my guide,” Balcom said. “But sometimes it isn’t until we are both at the starting line.”

WHAT IS NEEDED?

Anyone interested in pursuing running should seek out guidance and expertise. Several DSUSA chapters, like Dare2tri, offer coached workouts or monthly clinics. They can also provide access to equipment, guides for visually impaired runners, and resources needed to take up the sport.

“We try to eliminate any barriers you may have,” Serota said.

“Meeting someone that might have a similar disability, watching what they do, and getting a feel for the sport goes a long way.”

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