



**RUN  
STRONG  
STAY  
HUNGRY**

**9 KEYS TO  
STAYING IN  
THE RACE**

**JONATHAN BEVERLY**

**Featuring** Lifetime Competitors Deena Kastor,  
Bill Rodgers, Joan Benoit Samuelson, and more!

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# 2

## CONSISTENCY MAKING RUNNING A HABIT

To be a consistent winner means preparing not just one day,  
one month, or even one year—but for a lifetime.

—BILL RODGERS, FOUR-TIME WINNER OF THE BOSTON  
AND NEW YORK CITY MARATHONS

**If you run south from the center** of Lamoine, a small town on the coast of Maine, you'll find yourself on the Shore Road. A narrow strip of pavement, lacking even a painted center line, it winds among trees and quaint houses as it draws a rough circle around the western edge of the Lamoine peninsula. Occasionally you catch glimpses of the mountains of Acadia National Park in the distance, but you never reach the shore. Eventually you connect to Route 184, a slightly larger highway, and, turning left, soon arrive back at the Grange, 4.25 miles after you started.

The route is pretty, but mostly unremarkable. This loop, however, has a history. One summer evening in 1967, Robin Emery ran around it. She hasn't stopped since.

In '67, Emery was a 20-year-old coed at Allegheny College in Pennsylvania. The house where she now lives, next to the Lamoine Grange Hall, was her family's summer home. In those pre-Title IX days, she had

no competitive sporting opportunities. Emery, a tomboy who outran the boys throughout her childhood, chafed under this discrimination.

“Young ladies weren’t supposed to do that kind of thing,” she told me while sitting in her kitchen, the walls papered with race photos, framed results, and awards dating from the 1970s to the present. Women were considered fragile, she said, and society didn’t have a place for an athletic female. Adopting the voice of stodgy matron, Emery mocked, “You’re not supposed to sweat. Boys won’t like you if you beat them.”

One summer night, she started walking around “the square,” the 4-mile loop from the summer house, and decided she’d see if she could run it. “The next night, I did it again,” she said. “And that was it, ever since. Haven’t looked back.”

Emery continued running when she returned to college, often at night, on a golf course, or in a cemetery, wearing bulky sweatshirts to avoid unwanted stares and catcalls. The following summer, she again ran endless loops of “the square” back in Lamoine.

Eventually, she started entering races, and as the only woman, naturally, she won. But even when other women joined the ranks, she continued to win. Indeed, the first time she got beat was in the 1976 Portland Boys Club Race—by a precocious teenager 10 years her junior named Joan Benoit.

Emery kept running and competing through her 40s. She ran many of her best times as a master. “I was flying,” she said of her running during that time. The Maine Running Hall of Fame estimates that she won 255 races, one of the last being her 14th victory at the Bangor Labor Day 5-Mile Road Race, at age 51.

Eventually, the elite victories dried up, but that didn’t stop her. She kept running and racing through her 50s, then 60s, channeling her competitiveness into winning her age group. Today, at 70, she’s chomping at the bit to garner more age-group awards.

“I’m too dumb to stop!” she laughed.

Emery is the consummate lifetime competitor. She started in her youth and 50 years later is still competing, racing, and working passionately to be her best.

What is the key to her longevity?

## DEVELOPING THE HABIT

Those endless loops of her 4-mile “square” hint at the first key to running strong for a lifetime: consistency.

From the beginning, Emery has run consistently. What started as something she *could* do quickly evolved into something she *wanted* to do every day, and eventually something she *had* to do.

“It was beginning to be a habit back then,” she said, describing her early years of running. “Kind of hard not to run. I’d get really depressed.”

That habit hasn’t waned. Emery still runs every day, often the same loop that she first ran more than 50 years ago. She runs through Maine winters and summers, through aches and pains, and through the years that have slowly robbed her speed. Contemplating what keeps her going even now, she admits it probably has to do with what she calls an addiction to running.

“I haven’t missed a day in like three years,” she said. “It’s like eating. It’s like breathing. I can’t not run.”

Consistency is a universal feature of lifetime competitors’ training. These are people who run often—sometimes daily, or even twice daily, every week of the year, year after year.

It perhaps sounds axiomatic to note that the key characteristic of lifetime runners is that they run. But indeed, consistency lies at the very heart of their long-term running success.

American running icon Bill Rodgers, sometimes referred to as “King of the Roads,” offers another compelling portrait of consistency. Rodgers

won both Boston and New York four times and set masters records throughout his 40s. Having risen to the top of the sport, Rodgers continues both to run and to care as he approaches 70, whether he's doing 140-mile weeks and running 2:09 marathons, as he did in his 20s, or getting in 6 miles a day and happy with a 1:47 half-marathon, as he is today.

"I was running twice a day from age 26 to my late 40s," Rodgers said. "At 40, I was still doing some doubles, getting in 100-mile weeks."

Rodgers estimates that he's run more than 180,000 lifetime miles, and he said that for 15 years in his prime, he never missed more than three days.

Today he runs six days per week, about 40 to 60 miles total, with no intention of stopping. When asked if there was any time when he thought that he'd done enough, he responded with an impassioned no. "I'm one of those people who needs to run. I'm a runner for life."

Rodgers had to run a lot of miles to be elite. As important as that volume, however, has been his consistency.

## **ADDING IT UP**

Many lifetime runners have accumulated 100,000 or more miles. Reaching such a total doesn't happen in short, impassioned bursts of mileage. It requires running consistently high mileage every week, every year.

Dave Dunham, a 52-year-old from New Hampshire with elite running credentials on the roads and mountains, has kept a log since his first week of training for track in 1978. An accountant with the US Treasury, he keeps track of just about everything: daily miles, race times, injuries, even his win/loss record with his buddy Dan. So he can quantify what that kind of lifetime of running means in terms of consistency.

"I've done 133,000 miles lifetime, which is about 9.5 miles a day since December 1978," he rattled off. "Thirty-two hundred miles a year average. That's with days off."

For decades, he typically ran about 100 miles per week. Since turning 50, he's cut back his miles due to concern about his ankles. He still runs plenty, though, about 80 miles a week. "I do a lot of doubles, and then a longer run on the weekend," he said. He'd like to do even more but said he can live with 80 per week, if he disciplines himself.

Sixty-three-year-old Reno Stirrat boasts a lifetime total of more than 158,000 miles. In 2016, he ran 3,275 miles despite spraining his ankle and having to wear a boot for several weeks that fall. Stirrat has been going long since he spent a year in the US Marine Corps between high school and college in the early '70s.

In college, he upped his miles to 120 to 130 per week, settled down to 90 miles for several decades afterward, and today says he does about 80. He runs only once a day, so his runs average over 10 miles, with a weekly long run of 16 to 18 miles, whether he is training for a marathon or not.

Those consistent miles have carried Stirrat to sub-3:00 marathons in every decade since the '70s. Indeed, he's one of only a few who have run sub-2:45 in each of the last five decades, with a personal best of 2:19, and he aims to be the first to break 3:00 for six decades when 2020 rolls around.

## **SOMETHING EVERY DAY**

Rodgers, Dunham, and Stirrat are elite runners and have built up their ability to handle lots of miles. But consistency is a trait common to all lifetime competitors, even if their totals don't always add up to those high elite levels.

Craig Christians, 56, of Omaha, has been running since 1978, his sophomore year in high school. He considers his running above average, but not in the same league with elites.

But this has never deterred him. He was hooked from the start, even running a marathon his senior year of high school. He went on to run in

college, upping his miles to between 50 and 70 a week and developing a daily habit.

Christians has all his miles tallied on a spreadsheet with multiple tabs for PRs and lists of races in each decade. It reveals an average of 1,561 miles per year over the past 40 years. Many of the years fall close to that total, with only three lower than 1,000—injury years offset by a few stellar ones over 2,000.

Fifteen hundred miles per year works out to an average of 30 miles per week. No single 30-mile week sets the world on fire, but 2,080 of them have made Christians a solid, consistent competitor over a lifetime.

“If I were physically able, I can’t think of ever taking more than a week off at any time,” Christians said. “I am the church of consistency. I’m the leader of that church.”

Christians definitely views consistency as one of his keys to longevity. “Just do something every day. It’s that simple,” he said. It doesn’t have to be backbreaking or lengthy, he continued, adding that his mantra has become “it’s never a bad idea to go for a 30-minute run.”

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## EXTREME CONSISTENCY

Some, finding in consistency a key to success, then take it to an extreme. A passionate subgroup of runners includes those who have gotten in at least 1 mile per day, every day, for decades.

While some notable runners have held long-term streaks, such as Olympian Ron Hill, who ran every day for 52 years, streaking is actually quite uncommon among the lifetime competitors I interviewed. Kent Lang, 55, of Missouri was one of the few who maintained a significant streak. Lang said he’s always tended to run every day, going three to four years at a time with-

out breaks. His current streak of consecutive running days as of this writing dates from February 2006.

Not only is Lang consistent, but he also racks up a lot of miles for a sub-elite runner. During the '80s and '90s, while in his 20s and 30s, Lang often ran 90- to 100-mile weeks. Now 54, he still puts in 50 to 60 miles per week and says there has never been a day when he thought, *I don't want to run today.*

Lang admitted that as he's aged, he's found that minor injuries nag him, such as a recent bout of plantar fasciitis, but these haven't stopped his streak. "I haven't missed a day of running in over 10 years, so I'm not going to let a little PF make me stop," he said. "And if that means I hobble through a 2-miler because my PF hurts, then that's the way it is going to be."

In contrast, several lifetime competitors were adamantly against a daily compulsion. "I hate the streak thing," said Budd Coates. "I've never been afraid to take a day off."

Coates, 60, is not only a lifetime competitor but also a longtime coach and a trainer with Rodale and *Runner's World*. He believes in rest days, as well as crosstraining, to maintain consistency. "You don't have to run every day to enhance your fitness," he said. "You can crosstrain, you can use the spin bike, you can use the ElliptiGO [a combination of bike and elliptical trainer]."

Streaking has its pros and cons. Running every day is a great way to make running a nonnegotiable, automatic habit. It is also a viable goal and inspiration on its own, as it is for former Olympian Benji Durden, now 66, who took up streaking in his late 50s, following cancer diagnosis and treatment.

On the flip side, however, when streaking becomes the main goal, it can limit a runner's performance and competitiveness. If preserving the streak is the focus, then you may find yourself reluctant to push closer to your red line and risk having to miss a day. Streaking can also be a good way to get injured or exacerbate an injury, simply because of the nonnegotiable mandate.

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## REST DAYS

Several lifetime competitors, while consistent runners, also praised the benefits of taking days off.

John Mirth, 54, believes a key to his longevity stems from having learned early in his running life that he needs rest days. An engineering professor in Indiana, Mirth has a 2:19 marathon PR and has sustained a high level of fitness for four decades.

“I’ve had pretty good consistency,” Mirth said. “Every year since I’ve started running, I’ve been able to run over 2,000 miles per year.” Usually his total has been far more than that, with several years over 4,000, and many in the high 3,000s, or an average of 10 miles a day.

A few years after he got out of college, Mirth’s work schedule forced him take one day off a week. While at first reluctant, he was surprised to see that it improved his running, and he credits this day off, at least in part, for his continued ability to run high mileage through the years.

Masters miler Leonard Sperandeo, 56, of Sacramento, California, was once a streaker but stopped running every day after he turned 50. “A day off is critical, the older you get,” Sperandeo said, “for your mind, if not your body.”

This pattern was borne out in several others I interviewed. Needing more recovery, they increased their rest days as they aged, which meant one or two days off a week.

Lifetime competitors, even those running most days or even twice a day, also take more extended time off when they need to. At the height of his career, running doubles and 140-mile weeks, Bill Rodgers says he took breaks.

“If I had a twinge in my calf or Achilles, I’d take three days off and go to the exercise bike or pool,” Rodgers said. “Then I’d come back and I’d run 1 mile or 2. The next day, 2 or 4, then 6 or 8. So let the body recover, ramp up.”

Looking back, Rodgers reflects that he should have taken even more breaks. “I only took that time off because I was injured,” he said. “It probably wasn’t adequate. We didn’t rest enough,” he said, referring to himself and other elites who rose to fame during the ’70s running boom.

Fellow Boston Marathon champ Amby Burfoot, 71, follows a similar three-day-off strategy in response to a twinge. And, like Rodgers, he wishes he had learned to take breaks earlier in his career. Obsessed with maintaining high mileage, he’d run through mild injuries when he was younger, often making them worse, and didn’t learn the three-day rule until he was a master.

The bottom line is that serious runners take days off, either scheduled or as they feel they are needed. Running consistently doesn’t have to—and in many cases, shouldn’t—mean running daily.



## WHY IT MATTERS

Runner after runner revealed that they have run often, every week, month, and year for decades. Is this simply a sign of their shared passion, or is this kind of consistency actually key to their performance and longevity?

Research confirms the significance of consistency for masters runners. In a study published in the December 2008 *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, researchers questioned participants in the US and Canadian masters track and field championships about their performances and training throughout the years. They found that the most reliable predictor of performance was the amount of training done consistently over the past five years.

“Middle-aged athletic individuals who retain a high level of performance do so likely because they have maintained years of uninterrupted

practice, consistently have shorter off-season periods, exhibit higher weekly amounts of practice, and avoid injury,” researchers concluded.

The study also found that while the training that masters runners had done in the few months just before their races was a better predictor of their results than either age or early-life training, it was not as important as what they had done during the five years prior. A solid block of consistent training in the years prior to the performance made the most difference.

The research revealed that successful masters athletes have learned that they must train “systematically and continually” in order to maintain their skills and fitness.

## **Steady Dose**

It isn't just masters who benefit from being systematic and continual. Consistency is an essential key to running better at any age. In his comprehensive work *The Lore of Running*, sports scientist Tim Noakes named “Train Frequently, All Year-Round” as the first law of training. “What is really required is a little exercise constantly; this will benefit you permanently to a far greater degree than a single heavy dose at long intervals,” he wrote.

Running regularly allows you to get in more volume and adapt to that volume so that it becomes normal. Anytime you fall off, you have to rebuild your capacity for work, a slow and risky process.

Steve Kartalia, a lifetime competitor still racing at the national level in his 50s, learned the consistency lesson the hard way. After steady improvement in high school, his college running was disappointing due to a continuous up-and-down cycle of injury and recovery. Post-college, with the help of his coach, he found a level of effort that allowed him to maintain more consistent training.

That new level meant pulling back a little from his collegiate training load. His coach told him to run 60 to 70 miles a week, an amount he'd

shown he could maintain without injury, instead of the 80 to 90 that regularly put him on the disabled list. “It may take you longer to get fit, but once you get there, you’ll be able to race and keep racing and keep improving, rather than dropping back to an earlier point in the process,” his coach assured him.

*What is really required is a little exercise constantly;  
this will benefit you permanently to a far greater degree  
than a single heavy dose at long intervals.*

—TIM NOAKES

Sticking to the plan took patience and restraint. But Kartalia was able to build confidence and fitness through a newfound consistency, uninterrupted by the setbacks he had experienced before. Under the new strategy, he said, “I didn’t get injured, and my times just kept dropping.”

Four years later, Kartalia ran an Olympic Trials qualifying time in the 10,000 m. Kartalia’s continued success as a master stems from learning this lesson of consistency in his youth.

Avoiding setbacks and the need to restart is especially important for the masters athlete. “Fitness is easier to retain than to gain,” said coach Greg McMillan, author of *You (Only Faster)*. “As we age, regaining it becomes more and more difficult—physically and mentally. So, runners who have had a long successful running career are the ones that just keep racing. They keep training. And, they race lots of distances and do lots of different types of training. Use it or lose it seems to come to mind and these athletes continue to ‘use it’ so they never lose it.”

Whenever you take a break, even for as little as a week, running feels harder when you return to it. Christians tells about taking a couple of weeks off after a race to rest a groin injury. “Even after two weeks,” he said, “it is like, ‘Damn, I’ve never run before.’” It takes a few days of

running to get back to normal, and a few weeks to reach the same comfort with the training volume.

At some point, we've probably all experienced the feeling Christians expresses, and it isn't just in our heads. Coming back after time off *is* hard on your body. Multiple recent studies in a variety of sports have shown that it's harder to increase training volume than to maintain it. The studies suggest that what we've typically called "overuse injuries" would be better named "training load injuries." In other words, it isn't regular volume that causes the injuries, but spikes.

A 2016 study out of Australia showed that athletes who maintain a steady, high load of stress are less likely to get injured than those who have less volume of training. But if you increase your weekly load by 20 percent more than the average of the past four weeks, you slightly increase injury risk, and that risk becomes three to five times greater if you have a spike of 50 to 60 percent.

Interpreting these studies, professor of exercise science Tim Gabbett argued in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine* that chronic undertraining accompanied by overloading spikes is more likely to lead to injury than sustained heavy workload, which can actually protect against injury.

In another 2016 article in the same journal, researcher Mick Drew of the Australian Institute of Sport in Canberra wrote, "Labeling these injuries as 'overuse' may encourage athletes to reduce their training unduly, thus exposing their tissues to deconditioning or an inconsistent loading pattern which have been associated with injuries."

### **It's Getting Up to Speed That Hurts**

Signs indicate, then, that it isn't volume that hurts us but ramping up to that volume too quickly. If a runner wants to run at the mileage necessary for high performance, the safest way is to build up gradually then

stay at a relatively high volume over time. Inconsistency leads to having to build back up continually, thus increasing risk.

There's another reason inconsistent training hurts our ability to run. "When we lay off, we gain weight," said Coates. "Even if we don't gain weight, our bone density and muscle mass are affected in a negative way. When you take time off, you lose what is great and strong about your body. So now, when you start back, if your bone density isn't what it was and your body fat is higher than what it was, you're going to be less efficient. Which makes it biomechanically more difficult."

McMillan has a similar perspective on the issue. "Consistent training seems to also help with weight gain (avoiding it), mobility (maintaining it), and strength (gaining it)."

When you take time off, be it a week, a month, or a year, your return to training is harder and you're more likely to get injured as you ramp back up. The older you get, the more difficult this process becomes. After the difficulty of having to come back from foot surgery in 2013, author and lifetime competitor Scott Douglas said, "There's no way in hell I could have started running at 50."

Many I talked to who had quit running blamed the perils of inconsistency. When small breaks become longer breaks, you begin to lose fitness and gain weight. At that point, you can't pick up where you once were, everything feels harder, and it is too easy to just accept that you are over the hill and have become a former runner.

In contrast, those who maintain a constant level of fitness are often able to continue year after year, even at high mileage, because their bodies are adapted to that level of effort as "normal." As Douglas put it, "It's easier to run 50 miles a week than 20 miles a week." The consistency makes you stronger, which makes each run easier, which makes doing the next one easier in a self-perpetuating cycle.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jonathan Beverly fell in love with running as an unathletic but persistent high school freshman in the fall of 1977. He's never stopped. His passion for the sport compelled him to write about it while pursuing a career directing international exchange programs. He began publishing articles in a variety of magazines, which eventually led



to his becoming editor in chief of *Running Times* magazine from 2000 to 2015. During those years, he wrote a popular monthly editor's note, more than 35 feature stories and dozens of training articles, athlete profiles, race reports, and shoe and gear reviews. He coached adult runners with the New York Road Runners in the 1990s and has coached junior high and high school cross-country and track during the past 12 years. He has run 26 marathons with a best time of 2:46:04. His books and articles reflect his love of running, his depth of knowledge of the sport, his breadth of interests, and his continual quest to answer Why? and So what?

# THE KEYS TO RUNNING STRONG FOR A LIFETIME

**Why do some runners burn out,** hang up their shoes, and leave the sport behind, while others are still racing fast and finding passion in their running decades after they got their start? Running journalist Jonathan Beverly taps more than 50 lifetime runners—including champions Deena Kastor, Joan Benoit Samuelson, and Bill Rodgers—to reveal the habits and mindsets that keep them going strong.

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- Sidestepping burnout and injury
- Discovering the joy of effort-based training
- Continually striving for new goals
- Tapping into unrealized potential

Whether you are a new or dedicated runner, passionate about the sport or looking to rekindle the fire, the practices of these lifetime competitors will put you on the path to a thriving running career.

**JONATHAN BEVERLY** is an author, a coach, and the former Editor-in-Chief of *Running Times*.

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