

WellSpring

Physical Activity on the Edge

A Single Step

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“A journey of 1,000 miles
begins with a single step”—
Chinese proverb.

Imagine running continuously for over 24 hours, along trails, crossing streams, breathing in the fresh air, and watching the birds and squirrels along the trail. As you have planned, you take in electrolyte fluids, munch on sandwiches and pretzels, and stop briefly to attend to blisters and abrasions from falls. You have prepared for the weather and the night as you don your extra clothes, put on your head-lamp, and take out your flashlight and extra batteries.

If anyone had suggested 20 years ago that I would one day be a Phys. Ed. Grad., working as a fitness programmer and running ultra-marathons, I would have fallen down laughing (and probably broken a hip). Just ask the people at my high school where I was the poster child for the unfit. My motto was “Why move if you can sleep?” But after my experience participating in physical activity, my new motto is “I’ll sleep when I’m dead!”

My first marathon finish felt like giving birth: painful, exhausting, but totally satisfying (and I never wanted to do it again!). I should know—I have three sons. However, one month after that marathon, my partner, Byron, ran his first ultra-marathon, the Saskatchewan Ultras 50K, and I paced him the last 25 km. A woman who had completed the race told me that I ran well and that I could have run the whole thing. I sat quietly during the trip home vowing that I would run the next ultra with Byron.

What Is an Ultra-Marathon?

Ultra-marathons are not like marathons. A marathon is a race, but an ultra-marathon is an adventure.

Ultra-marathons range from 50 km up to almost 5,000 km and are run on tracks, roads, trails, through parks, and over mountains. A marathon will last anywhere from 3.5 to 5.5 hours for the average runner, whereas a typical 50 to 162 km ultra-marathon can take from five to 48 hours to complete.

An ultra-marathon requires a great deal of planning and training. You could successfully complete a marathon with training and minimal planning, whereas too little training and a lack of planning will inevitably lead you to a DNF (did not finish) in an ultra-marathon.

Preparing for a Run

During an ultra-marathon, the weather conditions, terrain, course conditions, and the runner’s physical and mental state determine success or failure. We experienced rain, sleet, and snow, and a temperature hovering around the freezing mark for 10 and a half hours one year at the Le Grizz 50 Miler. Unfortunately, my partner and I had not dressed for the weather,

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(N.B.: All references for the articles in this issue are available from the centre’s web site at www.centre4activeliving.ca.)





and we were both pre-hypothermic for most of the run. This race taught me a valuable lesson about preparing for any conditions.

The course terrain also plays a large role in preparing for the run. If the course is hilly and the footing technical, as in the Knee Knacker, training should include hill repeats on rough, uneven, and dry streambeds. Unfortunately, as we had no previous experience with such rugged terrain, we had done our hill training on the treadmill, at incline, instead of on a rougher surface. As a

result, we took 8 hours and 50 minutes to complete the course—a full three hours longer than we had expected.

The Mind's Role

The failure rate, depending on the distance and severity of the course, is generally around 40–65% in most ultra-races. Although physical preparation is critical to completing an ultra-marathon, mental conditioning is crucial to success. I've experienced three DNFs in the 21 ultra-marathons I've run—all due to my mental state.

My body was well trained and I was not injured, but in all of the cases, I either didn't have a burning desire to finish or I didn't think I could finish. On the other hand, a determined and positive mind-set has helped me to overcome tremendous physical adversity to complete ultra-marathons. In my first 160 km race, the Rocky Racoon, I had dollar-sized blisters on both insteps, bruised black toes, and severe nausea. However, because I had a positive attitude and desperately wanted to finish the race, I dug deep and completed the race in 25 hours, 52 minutes. One year, when we ran the Le Grizz 80 km race, I also battled food poisoning. Byron counted 17 potty stops, as I wrestled with nausea, dizziness, and pain to complete the race.

The Attraction of Ultra-Marathons

We have had some incredible adventures. Although running ultra-marathons involves physical and mental adversity, I have gained tremendous self-awareness and insight into my hidden potential. In the process, I have discovered an inner strength and mental toughness and the confidence to deal with adversity in other aspects of my life.

The main attractions of the ultra-marathon are the adventure, camaraderie, and closeness to nature. I've met some wonderful people, with varied educational and vocational experiences. Ultra-marathons also allow me to travel to new parts of the country.

Ultra-marathons may not be for everyone, but I have thoroughly enjoyed these races and hope to continue to do so for the next 40 years.

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Active Living from Womb to Tomb: Why Separate the Generations?

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Physical Activity from a Different Angle

Chronological age is often used to decide who should do what and which activities are socially appropriate (Vertinsky & O'Brien Cousins, 1999). Socialization according to gender, age, and culture starts so early in life that in everyday living we may assume that all older people are “over the hill” and don't want to be active with their children or grandchildren.

This powerful socialization is why we *laughed* when older Mrs. Doubtfire, in the movie of the same name, impressed her younger charges with her soccer skills. In the movie, Mrs. Doubtfire was actually a father (Robin Williams, disguised as a nanny). Kicking a soccer ball around with kids...a perfectly normal thing for a dad to do, but an older woman in a skirt and sweater? Too funny!

Why is this so funny? Maybe it's time to rethink what is normal about relegating adults to park benches while kids play soccer in the park. Why is it good for kids to play and have fun and not good for people 50 to 70 years older? Well, it's *not* good for any adults to just sit. Moreover, it is also not good for kids to think that they will just sit on the

bench when they become adults. The socialization continues—each generation trains the next that it is socially inappropriate to play, stay physically involved, and have fun together.

This process explains why there are no *family* soccer teams in our community leagues. But what if each community league fielded a “family team”? Three families of three players each (per side) could be on the field at any one time. A “substitution” would require one entire family unit to run off while another family unit ran in to play. One family could play strikers, one family could play midfield, and one family could play defence, including goalie. A “family” could also mean a child under 10 and adults under and over the age of 40 (both genders represented). This means a family could be little brother, big brother, and mom, or little brother, dad, and grandma, or little sister, teen sister, and grandpa...the combinations are endless.

Suppose we had an “under age 90” team? To form a team, you would need nine players, one from each decade. How cool is that? Kids who wanted to play soccer would be rounding up advanced-age soccer players from the local seniors’ centre or lodge so that they could play. Mrs. Doubtfire would be a very welcome addition to the team. People would cheer instead of laugh at her unusual skill!

The rules could also compensate for differences between players. For example, you could play a no-contact game and provide a safe zone around the youngest and oldest players carrying the ball. Or you could change the game so that disadvantaged players become advantaged (e.g., using a slower foam ball that goes less far).

The Downside of Targeted Programs

If active living is good for us all, why are we currently programming for age segregation? Enormous gains are being made in the diversity of community programming for recreation and the sport skills that support active living. From infant aquatics to seniors’ synchronized swimming, from classes for expectant mothers to cardiac rehab, programs are marketed to special “target” groups. There is nothing wrong with this approach,

except that it segregates people, keeping the extreme ends of the social continuum apart, i.e., they don’t get to “play” together.

Targeted programs separate young people from older people, men from women, and skilled people from less skilled people, so that we never seem to enjoy physical activity together. In high-performance settings, physiological realities can be a reason to tier sport teams by ability. But does tiering make sense for fitness and community recreation?

Why Bring the Generations Together?

Currently, age, gender, and abilities are used to manage physical inequities and organize who plays with whom. Dad drives son to hockey and watches. Mom drives daughter to ringette and watches. Grandma stays home and knits. Grandpa does a crossword puzzle and watches TV until he falls asleep. Why bother bringing such disparate people together?

One reason is that younger people will get to know their parents and grandparents better and learn how to manage their own ageing bodies. Older people will feel more valued and will try to keep up with the crowd. Everyone involved learns from the other—whether it’s how to show a referee respect or how to pass the ball effectively. Families would cheer each other on, and if somebody “goofs up,” they could show “sportskinship.”

Such socially supportive activity promotes wellness and could slow down ageing. Mutual respect and embracing our differences lead to a healthy society. There is a saying, “the family that plays together stays together.” Perhaps we need to rethink how we isolate people in the various forms of fitness activity, sport, and recreation in our communities.

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Extreme Sports: Too Fine a Line?

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Contradictory Attitudes to Risk

Society's approach to the risk of injury and death often seems contradictory. In some respects, we have become increasingly risk-averse, taking steps to reduce the dangers posed by everything from cars to household appliances.

At the same time, though, other evidence (Greenfeld, 1999; Groves, 1987) points to some people's willingness to participate in risky activities. The last decade has seen a popularity surge in extreme sports involving air, verticality, and wild water. Although these activities can lead to higher life insurance premiums, the number of accidents reported every year does not seem to be increasing (Williamson, 2003).

Compounding these contradictions are the misconceptions about the inherent risks. Foust (2003) points out that some people perceive flying as a far more dangerous activity than driving, despite the far greater risk of dying in a car crash. According to the US National Safety Council, an American has about a 1-in-80 chance of dying in a car accident (vs. 1-in-4,608 for flying accidents). However, a fear of flying is still more common than a fear of driving.

The philosopher William James (1906) once wrote that the problem for mankind is to find "the moral equivalent of war." James was, of course, referring to the positive aspects of extreme activity, including adventure, excitement, heroism, and the focus of effort. The contrast between previous generations' involvement in extreme acts of aggression and the present generation's enthusiasm for extreme acts of recreation is intriguing.

Why Are Some People Risk-Takers?

Being shot at in war and "shooting" oneself down a high snow-covered cliff are worlds apart, but do have one thing in common: the chance of being killed is relatively high. One can understand, perhaps, the willingness to die for one's country as an act of patriotism, but to risk it all while recreating is hard to understand, especially for the uninitiated.

In life, there are risk-takers and risk-avoiders. "Jumping in at the deep end," an activity associated with experiential learning, requires commitment and active involvement, develops decision-making skills and shrewd judgement, and can help people become more mature. Conversely, classroom learning ("the shallow end") can involve inactivity, require less initiative, and mean that life skills are acquired more slowly.

Societies do not generally provide challenging or inspiring systems of education or enough suitable outlets for the adventure instinct.

Extreme sports and risk recreation may fill this gap.

Willingness to step into the unknown and into high-end experience should not be confused with recklessness. Price (1974) noted that recklessness can involve a certain lack of commitment, a damping down (for thrills) of foresight and imagination. Recklessness is essentially frivolous, whereas the adventure of extreme sports is entirely serious (in terms of making its participants more self-disciplined and responsible).

A Realistic Look at the Risks

And what about the accidents that generally occur in outdoor extreme sports? Studies (e.g., Curtis, 1995) consistently indicate three main causes of accidents:

- carelessness;
- overestimating ability, both as individuals (the largest percentage of accidents occurs among people in the 16 to 20 age bracket) and as groups (the main cause being over-zealous leaders); and
- lack of, misuse of, or poor-quality equipment.

On the other hand, extreme sports demand perpetual care, discipline, and high levels of preparation and training. Most participants are well aware of their strengths and limitations especially in the face of obvious objective danger. And they usually use the best (often sponsored) equipment.

In mountaineering, a traditional bastion of extreme activity, there

have been 126 reported deaths in Canada over the last 20 years (averaging 6.3 annually). Last year, there were six deaths (Williamson, 2003). Although any deaths are tragic, these figures are definitely and reassuringly not on the rise.

Risk–Reward Equations

But life is, and always will be, a question of survival. I put together the list below to summarize current risk–reward equations (and some examples of each category).

- High risk/High reward:
Examples include extreme sports, unconventional outdoor activities, adventure education.
- High risk/Low reward:
Examples include violent acts of aggression, drug/alcohol abuse, criminal activity.
- Low risk/Low reward:
Examples include passive non-involvement, vicarious entertainment, “reality” TV.
- Low risk/High reward:
Examples include lotteries, classroom learning.

A Final Word

Every generation needs to make its own statement and carve its own niche. One of the great pleasures in life is doing what people say you cannot do. However, it’s worth remembering that sports that may seem “out there” today could involve mass participation in the future. For example, snowboarding, once considered “extreme,” is now mainstream.

Finally, two related quotes worth considering...

“The world has but three sports: Bullfighting, Mountain Climbing, and Motor Racing. All the rest are merely games”—Ernest Hemingway.

“Life is either a daring adventure or nothing at all” —Helen Keller.

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Pitfalls of Extreme Sports

I see three main pitfalls for people considering participation in extreme sports.

- The “instant success” syndrome. Often, people take short programs or certificates for instant gratification and come out of these lacking judgement.
- The “go for it” syndrome. Participants in extreme sports may overestimate their ability, leading to reckless behaviour.
- The “new driving licence” syndrome. Participants’ lack of experience may make them vulnerable to injury.



The Access Challenge: Pushing the Limits of Disability

THIS ARTICLE IS REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION FROM *NEW MOBILITY* (BRITISH COLUMBIA MOBILITY OPPORTUNITIES SOCIETY).

What Is the Access Challenge?

He never thought he'd say it, but Mike Nemesvary couldn't wait to get back into his wheelchair. After spending two nights and three days in the protective confines of a specially designed sleeping bag, while being pushed, pulled, and lifted through the wilderness to the base of Black Tusk Peak in British Columbia, Canada's Garibaldi Provincial Park (near Whistler), Nemesvary considered his wheelchair to be a luxury.

Nemesvary's excursion marked the British Columbia Mobility Opportunities Society's (BCMOS) fourth annual Access Challenge—a three-day backcountry wilderness expedition that combined adventure, competition, and education with camping, hiking, and mountaineering.

From August 20–22, six hikers with disabilities, each fuelled by four non-disabled participants, trekked their way across 36 km of mountainous terrain.

Using the uniquely designed TrailRider access vehicle, “sherpas” guided their teammates

with disabilities through alpine meadows, over jagged rocks and across raging waters. Each team had been educated on the practices of “no trace” camping. The event demonstrated what can be accomplished through a combination of strong will, enduring spirit, and undeniable trust.

Nemesvary, 45, is president and CEO of the Round the World Challenge. A former World Cup champion freestyle skier and Canadian junior trampoline champion, Nemesvary injured his spinal cord in 1985 when a routine trampoline workout went wrong. Practicing a “full in-full out”—a laid-out double twisting, double back flip—he lost his orientation and landed on his neck, leaving the then-24-year-old a quadriplegic at the C4-5 level.

While participants in the outdoor expedition admitted that day one was indeed a “slog,” from cameras and chaos in the parking lot to a 1,068-m climb across 6 km of treed terrain, their tireless efforts

proved to be a worthy price to pay for reaching the alpine.

When they reached an elevation of 1,555 m, the six teams had the pleasure of seeing clouds disperse and the sun highlight their temporary quarters in Taylor Meadows. There, after everyone's adrenaline settled, participants were able to enjoy a time of outdoor relaxation and, surprisingly, some epicurean cuisine.

On the morning of day two, the teams awoke to a misty fog blanketing the meadow, prelude to the most magical of days. Enthusiastic participants navigated their way across a 10-km stretch of trail, through fields painted colourfully by wildflowers and sparkling white snow, eventually descending into the cinder flats underneath Panorama Ridge in the shadows of Black Tusk. Helm Creek campsite served as the teams' evening accommodation.

The 20-km trek on day three took the teams over challenging



switchbacks and down steep rocks, proving to be the hardest portion of the outdoor expedition. Nemesvary admitted that he expected the third day to be similar to the first when they ascended the switchbacks. Instead, he found that the narrow trails covered by jutting rocks and slippery tree roots made it difficult to accommodate everyone plus the TrailRider.

The teams' efforts eventually brought them to the Cheakamus River, and to what many participants considered to be the climax of the outdoor expedition. The participants, including their TrailRiders, crossed the Cheakamus Canyon suspended via a zip-line engineered by the North Shore Search and Rescue team, marking the first time such a feat had been completed by high quadriplegics and people with significant physical disabilities. Search and Rescue volunteers assisted the participants, and kayakers were stationed below in the river.

And Next Year?

The event finished once the teams crossed the river to the finish line. After being greeted by friends and family, participants were treated to a catered barbeque, an awards ceremony, and a massage tent

staffed by volunteers from the University of British Columbia massage therapy clinic. As if they weren't exhausted enough, a number of diehards continued the celebration late into the evening in Whistler.

"The event was first class from beginning to end, from the route that was chosen, to the equipment that was used, to the refreshments, food, and awards at the end," said Nemesvary.

For those thinking about taking part in the annual outdoor expedition, Nemesvary says, "Go for it. Don't be intimidated or afraid of a new challenge." For him, one of the biggest highlights of participating in the Access Challenge was the incredible accomplishment he felt from facing his fears head-on and tackling something so demanding.

Living with a disability is difficult in itself, but taking on additional physical challenges takes stamina, endurance, and a huge amount of inner strength. According to participants, this is what excites, educates, enriches, and makes life interesting. The unknown piques interest, and the thrill of a challenge sustains participants to the end.



Nemesvary still stays in touch with his teammates, mostly via e-mail, and while he is considering participating again next year, he would make more of an effort to train for the event. "There is nothing else designed anywhere in the world that gets you into such inhospitable surroundings," said Nemesvary. "I mean, why should that part of nature only be reserved for able-bodied people?"

For more information on the Access Challenge, please contact the British Columbia Mobility Opportunities Society at 604-688-6464, visit www.disabilityfoundation.org/bcmos, or e-mail bcmos@disabilityfoundation.org.

The TrailRider

The TrailRider looks like a cross between a rickshaw and a wheelbarrow—a specially designed, multi-terrain access single-wheeled chair with handles in the front and back that can be simultaneously pushed and pulled by non-disabled hikers.

During the Access Challenge, participants with disabilities were seated in mummy bags—sleeping bags specially designed for TrailRider users who are not able to maintain core body temperatures as easily as their non-disabled teammates. The bags are designed to protect TrailRider users from wind, rain, and cold temperatures and are equipped with handles to make transfers to and from TrailRiders easier for able-bodied volunteers.

News from the Alberta Centre for Active Living

Alberta Survey on Physical Activity

The Alberta Centre for Active Living has just published its most recent survey of the physical activity levels of Albertans. This survey focuses on leisure-time physical activity levels (taking into account several intra-personal, socio-demographic, and environmental variables). To access a copy of the survey, please visit the centre's web site at www.centre4activeliving.ca/whatsnew/currentprojects.html.

The Coalition for Active Living

The Coalition for Active Living is coordinating the development of a Pan Canadian Physical Activity Strategy. For more information, visit the coalition's web site at www.activeliving.ca.

ALCOA Speakers' Bureau Project

The Alberta Centre for Active Living recently hosted and trained volunteers for the ALCOA Speakers' Bureau Project. This project promotes active living through articulate older adult volunteer speakers who are themselves leading physically active lives.

If you know of any potential volunteer speakers or would like to request an active living presentation for older adults in the Edmonton area, please contact Timothy Fairbank, Older Adult Coordinator, at 780-427-7938 or timothy.fairbank@ualberta.ca.

For more information on the ALCOA Speakers' Bureau project visit the older adults part of the centre's web site (www.centre4activeliving.ca).

Go for Green's Walking Tour of Canada

Go for Green's Walking Tour of Canada is a web-based teachers' resource that turns the walk to school into a fun and learning experience for students. Using an interactive web site, classes can log the distances they walk to school. For more information, visit <http://asrts.goforgreen.ca/english> or contact Nathalie Racine, Active & Safe Routes to School Coordinator at 1-888-822-2848 (or, in Alberta, Bev Esslinger, Provincial SHAPE Coordinator at 780-406-8530 or Shapeab@shaw.ca).

World Masters Games

Masters sport is coming to Alberta in a big way in 2005, when Edmonton hosts the World Masters Games from July 22 to 31. Although the concept of masters sport has taken hold in other parts of the world, the term is still unfamiliar to many Canadians—including those who are masters athletes and don't know it! For more information, visit www.2005worldmasters.com.

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Mission Statement

of the Alberta Centre for Active Living

Working with practitioners, organizations, and communities to improve the health and quality of life of Albertans through physical activity.

IF YOU HAVE ANY SUGGESTIONS OR QUESTIONS, WE'D LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU.

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