

A SEASON TO STREAK

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Sometimes you find amazing things in faraway places accessible only by camera-toting explorers in deep-water vessels; sometimes you find them just down the road. My buddy Gerry lives down the road. He runs every day. By that I mean he literally runs every day without skipping for any reason ever. He has laced up and headed outside to run through hurricanes, blizzards, lightning storms, ice storms, heat waves, hangovers, flus, fevers, sprains, tears, broken toes, broken fingers, broken ribs and every imaginable family and professional obligation for the past 21 years. Minimum valid distance in emergencies is one mile – for example, a transcontinental flight to Beijing that crossed the international date line, when he had to run his mile through the airport in dress shoes; a vacation with friend on a live-aboard with no land in sight, when he had to run circles on the deck of a sailboat; the days following his two marathons. “The Streak,” he calls it, then usually smiles and shakes his head and says, “I don’t recommend it.”

Of course, he doesn’t have to recommend it to recommend it. He’s 10 years older than me but looks 10 years younger. While many of my runs are overly dramatic and stubbornly muddled with hardship, his are clear and simple and done. Rather than wear fitness like a fancy jacket on running days like I do, he has absorbed fitness into the fabric of his life. I’ve asked him how he does it, how he runs every day, and he always shrugs like it’s no big deal. He says a morning run is on par with brushing his teeth and he wouldn’t think of skipping that either. I tell him that’s the nut-job speaking, and he should admit that only to people he trusts. Because we all want something different on our pizza, but we can all agree that there’s a significant difference running five miles and a little oral hygiene.

Then one afternoon, a friend sent an e-mail with an invitation for me to see firsthand how different they really are. A link in the mail brought me to a page for something called the Runner’s World Holiday Streak – a challenge to run at least one mile every day through the sticky-bun gravy-trough of Thanksgiving to New Year’s Day. You sign on and gut it out for the next 40-plus days or call yourself a quitter. “Do it smart and you’ll emerge from the holiday season unscathed, and maybe even fitter than you were before,” the page said – essentially a Don’t-Get-So-Stinking-Fat Holiday Streak.

This was an interesting idea. A holiday season without weight gain, it seemed freakish. It seemed lacking in holiday spirit. Like a Christmas tree without ornaments. Scrooge was very skinny, you’ll remember. The evil magician who almost melted Frosty the Snowman was also very thin. Holidays without weight gain would break a long-standing personal tradition. Would I be as much fun at parties if I didn’t bring the big cheeks with me? What would it be like to enter the cold snap of January without the extra weight? Was it even advisable? Would I feel an urge to migrate?

Mostly I wondered whether I would have time to run every day. In a house with three kids, two full-time jobs, extended family to feed, songs to play, decorations to hang, cookies to make, booze to drink, and Santa’s sleigh to fill, I wondered how I could fit it all in. Then I thought about something my friend and RW colleague Mark Remy said about finding time to run – a long to do list isn’t a reason to skip a run, it’s a reason to do one. And if Gerry found time to run every day for 21 years, I could probably do the same for a little over a month.

“I’ll do it,” I said out loud to no one in the room. A running streak is a deal you make only with yourself.

“As long as it’s not a gateway drug,” Susan said later that day. “Holiday Streak sounds quaint, but if you’re still on it a year later, I’ll have to tie you down and lock you up for a day.” I told her I didn’t think that would be a problem but made her promise to do so if necessary.

The beginning of the streak was a Thanksgiving turkey trot no different than what I’d done ever since I began running. The afternoon was also the same – a mountain of food washed down with wine. Different was that I had to haul the food/wine mountain out with me for the following morning’s run – one I would have skipped if not for the streak. Like people who use a day of rest to recover from a long run, I discovered I had always used a day of rest to recover from a long food hangover.

That weekend, we had guests over for dinner. Between the shopping and the cleaning and cooking, I hadn’t found a moment to get a run in. Just before they arrived I dashed out in jeans and running shoes for three miles and returned as they were pulling up the driveway. When they got out of the car they asked me if everything was okay. I said yes and flared my nostrils to try to breathe through my nose. They smiled uncomfortably, and I asked them to open the wine and have a glass while I took a quick shower.

I knocked off work, easy runs for the next several days whenever I could fit them in. On the seventh day of the streak, I blasted through a white-out snowstorm and exercised my first just-one-mile option. When I stepped back into the warm house, I looked like I’d lost a fight with a snowplow. The kids asked if I was all right. I said yes and tried to casually flip the snow off my shoulders as if running a mile through a blizzard for no reason at all was something dads did from time to time.

Four weeks into the streak I had hit a rhythm. You do almost anything every day for four weeks and you start to get good at it. I no longer got tired on a run. I found out my legs don’t hurt on days off when you never take a day off. You never feel guilty about the run you don’t take when you take them all. You don’t have favorite running clothes – you have whatever is clean and whatever

works, which is whatever you grab when you reach in the drawer. Individual runs are not important but running as a whole feels more so. One morning I completed a long run without ever breathing faster than a resting pace. Once I came home after an exceptionally cold run and looked in the mirror at the icicles on my eyelashes and thought, I am officially as crazy a runner as anyone I've ever made fun of. Then I took a hot shower and dressed up and looped a belt around my waist and hooked the buckle on the smallest hole – a new hole on a belt I've had for more than 10 years.

Ever since moving into our small house, I've had a recurring dream that I discover a hidden door that opens into a large room I never knew about – the more I explore the room, the larger it gets and the more shocked I become that it's hidden in plain sight.

By New Year's Day, I felt that dream had come true in a sense. When you're on a running streak, you discover a new room called the road. Any place you spend time in every day becomes a kind of room, even if it's a strange one – even if it's narrow and miles long and has cars and trucks occasionally driving through it. Some amazing things are in faraway places, some are down the road, and sometimes the amazing thing is just the road itself.

I completed a short run with Gerry on New Year's Day – the last day of my special streak. As we parted, he smiled and told me it was supposed to be beautiful weather the next day, perfect for a run. I told him I'd probably get one in, and I did – a 10-mile blaster on January 2 that tied me down and locked me up for the rest of the following day.