

Running streak adventurers: chills, thrills and a million stories by Candy Patrin

There are days when even

the most dedicated runners dig deep to find the motivation or time to run. Not so much with the athletes who have running streaks on the line. For running streakers, a missed run means having to cope with the end of an era.

The United States Running Streak Association, Inc. (USSRSA) posts current and retired daily running streaks on its website, (www.runeveryday.com), statistics that will knock your socks and running shoes off. Founded in 2000, the USSRSA requires members to run a minimum of one continuous mile within each calendar day without the help of any mechanical aids other than prosthetic devices. Membership is open to runners who have met the criteria for a minimum of one year.

The top ranking Minnesotan, Steve DeBoer, of Rochester, is number five on the USSRSA list, with a daily running streak of over 36 years. As of December 2007, there were 161 runners with running streaks listed on the website, nine of whom live in Minnesota. At least two other runners, Steve Gathje (35 plus years, number 9) and Hal Gensler (18 plus years, number 90), live elsewhere, but have roots in Minnesota.

Top Minnesotan

DeBoer, who has lived in Rochester since 1987, grew up in St. Paul, where he started running to get in shape for basketball. After getting cut from the junior varsity basketball team, he decided to try cross country. From 1978 to 1980 during a Peace Corps tour in Ecuador, where dogs serve as security systems for their owners, DeBoer experienced a different side of "man's best friend."

On an out and back run in Ecuador, DeBoer encountered the same dog twice. On the way back, the dog jumped from behind a bush and bit DeBoer's left leg just above the knee. DeBoer made it back to the tiny rental apartment where the owners, who lived upstairs, helped him clean the wound. They also gave him a whip to carry on future runs for protection. DeBoer used it once during a run to scare off some dogs that stopped feasting on a carcass to take chase.

In 2001, he continued the running streak in spite of experiencing some serious pain during a run. DeBoer's wife sent him to the emergency room, where a kidney stone was identified as the source and removed. "Since I was on pain meds the next few days, the following day's run was relatively pleasant in comparison," says DeBoer.

Last year, a little past the eight mile marker of a 10 mile trail race, he stepped in a hidden hole with his left foot: DeBoer heard a popping noise, took two steps and knew he had to stop running. The x-rays revealed an avulsion fracture along with a major sprain. Unbelievably, he was able to maintain the running streak at a much reduced pace and with extra precautions. A follow up x-ray showed that everything was healing nicely. "The doctor was impressed that I was back to running and saw no problem with my continuing to do so. I did not tell him I had run one mile the day after the accident," says DeBoer.

DeBoer says he continues his running streak one day at a time. His goal is to run the distance to the moon by age 80 (123,000 miles completed; only 93,000 miles left) and a marathon at 90 years old.

Minnesota transplant

Anyone who has participated in the MDRA Grand Prix Series recognizes the name Hal Gensler, the ever efficient statistician who has monitored the race results and maintained the rankings for 18 years. What most people don't know is that Gensler has an 18 plus year daily running streak going.

A retired CPA, Gensler lived in the western Twin Cities suburbs, most recently Golden Valley, before moving to New River, Arizona three year's ago. He ran in high school and college before taking a 20 plus year break from the sport. Gensler returned to running in his early 40s. During his streak, Gensler has logged 688 races from distances of 50 meters to the 24 hour FANS race, which he competed in three times. The year before Gensler's official running streak started, he occasionally would add an extra day to his six days per week schedule.

On December 4, 1989, Gensler began his running streak. He has prevailed through extreme weather conditions from minus 24 degrees to the scorching Arizona heat. Having run over 50,000 miles during his streak, Gensler hopes to keep it going to 25 years before deciding whether to continue.

Grand Prix Series Streakers*

19 years: Norm Purrington and Ed Rousseau

18 years: Judy Cronen

17 years: Greg Prom (1990 to 2006)
16 years: Kirt Goetzke
15 years: Mary Lou Carlson and
Hal Gensler (1990 to 2004)

**Individuals who have participated in the Grand Prix Series for consecutive years. Reflects statistics from 1990, the first year Hal Gensler began to keep data.*

Frequent flyer

Steve Moosbrugger, who calls Edina, Minnesota, home, ran in high school and college. After taking time off, Moosbrugger started to run again in his early 30s. He never thought about streaks until he thought about improving his marathon time after running Grandma's Marathon in 1989.

Over a few years of racing and getting close to his sub three hour marathon goal, Moosbrugger decided that running every day might help. With that training approach, Moosbrugger set a PR at the 1996 Twin Cities Marathon with a 2:54 and began his running streak the next day. On December 30, he took a day off, which ended that streak and turned around to start another one on December 31, 1996.

Moosbrugger continued his running streak, with his personal criteria of at least three miles a day. There were many logistical and some physical challenges, such as a hernia repair and a backache so bad he couldn't stand up straight. The backache made him think about quitting. However, his daughter convinced Moosbrugger to keep on going, so he put in his miles on a track.

In spite of traveling all over the world for his job, Moosbrugger has made time for a run in more than a few unusual places. On a trip from San Paolo, Brazil, to Hong Kong, he saw a running opportunity during a four hour layover in Amsterdam. Moosbrugger

Marathon streakers and more

It's not unusual to have favorite races that you put on the calendar every year. However, when the every year part reaches double digits, then friends, family and race directors start to take notice. Meet a few local area runners who have some of the most unique marathon and other streaks going.

Double stalker

John Naslund, of Bloomington, Minnesota, is the only runner to start and finish all Grandma's (31) and Twin Cities (26) Marathons. He started running after college in the early 70s. At the time of the inaugural Grandma's, he had already run other marathons, including Boston.

He says that no one would even know about running streaks, except when the races "make a big deal about it."

Naslund's running streaks began because both events were hometown marathons, and it seemed to be the natural thing to do for someone who was active in the running community.

Naslund grew up in Two Harbors, Minnesota, and knew some of the Grandma's Marathon organizers. According to Naslund, there were only about 150 runners at the Grandma's inaugural, where he posted a time of 2:41:17 for a fifth place finish. The number of athletes who have run all 31 Grandma's Marathons has now dwindled down to three, while the Twin Cities Marathon (TCM) was 65 before the 2007 event.

There is a definite logistical advantage to running a marathon that begins in your hometown. When Naslund runs Grandma's, he stays with his parents at his childhood home, just two miles from the start. No early morning bus rides for this runner. Naslund heads out the door for a warm up run on the way, arriving around 7:05 a.m. with time to spare.

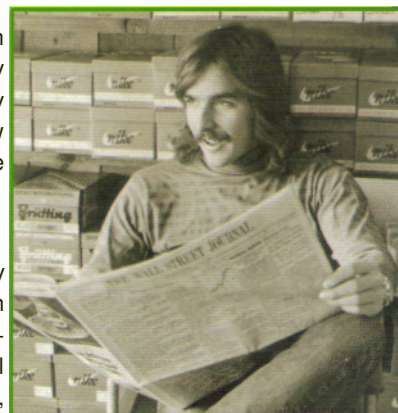
Even a marathon stalker like Naslund says the weather conditions at the 2007 TCM were challenging. He felt tired early on and says he mentally calculated the distance he needed to run in order to finish, figuring he would need to take some walk breaks. He crossed the finish line under four hours with a 3:53:15.

When asked how long his marathon streaks will continue, he smiles and shrugs. "I do it each year, and now it has taken on a life of its own," says Naslund.

Triple stalker

Lisa Boulay, of Bemidji, Minnesota, admits to being hooked on maintaining her triple streak. She is the only runner to start and finish every TCM, Walker North Country Marathon (25) and the Minnesota Finlandia Marathon, which is currently a 50K cross country ski race (26).

Like many runners, Boulay traces her running roots back to high school, graduating in



John Naslund, a little closer to the beginning of his streak

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rented a hotel room, checked in, ran and showered before the hotel front desk could finish processing the reservation.

On another date, when he was traveling from Santiago, Chile, to Minneapolis, and with only a two hour layover in Dallas, Moosbrugger stopped in the airline lounge to change for a run. The only glitch: a soaked boarding pass, although Moosbrugger did carry it in a plastic bag during the run.

A story that has been repeated more than a few times happened after the opening of his company's office in Minsk, Belarus. As tradition goes, Moosbrugger says there were many shots of vodka exchanged at the event. He returned to his hotel room very late, realized he still needed to get in his daily run and headed out into the cold, snowy night. With the snow covering his tracks, he got lost during the

run and flagged down a taxi to get back to his hotel. The next day, Moosbrugger realized that he had been only two blocks away from the hotel.

In 2006, at 12 years and one day, Moosbrugger retired his second running streak due to a medical condition. He has worn through the cartilage in his left hip and says he will eventually need hip replacement surgery. "The last year [of the running streak] was pretty rough," says Moosbrugger. "My left hip was on fire most of the time and pretty sore."

Moosbrugger has run over 60 marathons and will continue to look for alternative exercises and competitions. "So, I now have a new streak of not running. I ride the bike instead, although not every day," says Moosbrugger. "I assure you, if I were able to, I would still have the streak alive."

Streaker wannabees

It takes a lot of determination and perseverance to run every day for a year, let alone 36 years and counting. When asked to offer advice to future running streakers, DeBoer came up with five suggestions.

- Find a time of day to run that has the fewest conflicts and be willing to change if conflicts arise.
- Seek encouragement from family/friends that will support your goal.
- Take it easy, and run short, when dealing with minor aches, pains or illness.
- Listen to your body.
- Find a place to live where the weather is nice all year long.

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Running Streaks

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1976. Unlike many female runners, Boulay first ran on the boy's cross country team as a freshman, because there wasn't a girl's team until later in her high school career.

Boulay says she never imagined her current running streaks would continue this long. She had run a few marathons locally before finishing the first TCM as a college student. In fact, Ed Rousseau, who is another TCM streak runner, teases Boulay about her young age at the inaugural event and how he had to stop to change her diaper. Boulay first ran the Walker North Country Marathon, because it was close to her home. There have been years when the two marathons fell on consecutive weekends, which have been challenging logistically and sometimes physically as well.

Boulay, a health industry professional who works shifts, says every year she worries about whether she will get the time off to compete in her streak races. There have been some injuries too. In August one year, she sustained a pelvic fracture as a result of a fall while inline skating. "That year, I walked at Walker so not to lose my streak," says Boulay. "At TCM, I ran the first half and hobbled the last half, but I made it. I was concerned."

Boulay describes running as a spiritual experience and considers the other runners she has met through the years to be like family. She doesn't think about retiring the running streaks and prefers instead to look forward. "When I run my fiftieth TCM, I'll be only 74 years old," says Boulay.

Dynamic duo

Jim and Sue Simonet, of River Falls, Wisconsin, are the only married couple to finish every TCM. Sue started to run in her 30s, quit smoking and from there continued on a fitness path. The husband and wife team decided to try a marathon after running shorter distances and volunteering to call out splits at the halfway point of the St. Paul Marathon, a predecessor to TCM.

In 1982, the Simonets ran Grandma's Marathon and decided to sign up for the first TCM, because they didn't want to waste all the training time they had logged. At the time, the couple had no plans for a marathon running streak. Running TCM became a way to measure their fitness level from year to year.

The first three years were the most difficult for Jim, who competed with injuries, including a pulled groin muscle, sore knees and 18 stitches to close a gash on his leg. "After getting through the early years, I really haven't been able to come up with an excuse not to run," says Jim.

In addition to running, the Simonets bike together. For 17 consecutive years, the couple has participated in The Ride Across Minnesota (TRAM), a five day 300 mile bike tour along the back roads of Minnesota and fundraiser for the Multiple Sclerosis Society. They ride with a group called the TRAM-addicts, consistently one of the top fundraising teams on the tour.

Unfortunately, the official status of the Simonet's TCM streak as a couple ended in 2007 when Sue received a disqualification letter, along with about 175 other runners, for wearing an iPod® during the marathon. Jim takes some of the blame. After years of running the same race, he submitted the entry without reading the form closely. Neither Jim nor Sue noticed the signage at the TCM expo.

While the couple will continue to run TCM and other races together, Jim says there is only one true streak that he hopes to keep going. "In 1969, Sue made me her number one draft choice. Fortunately, I haven't been cut or traded for the last 39 years, but I have been sent to the minors for a little attitude adjustment on occasion," says Jim.

The Simonets have completed marathons together in locations from Hawaii to Alaska to Boston, while taking in some memorable vacations. Jim and Sue agree, "Life is good." D

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