

Running has shaped my life

By Bill Shaw

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Today I am 67. I crunched out this column Saturday after I returned from finishing my 19th triathlon.

I ran my first triathlon on the eve of my 62nd birthday in 2001. I ran my first of 10 marathons at 48.

In high school, I failed as an athlete. I was a B-team scrub, whom the varsity beat up on as we ran the formations and plays of the upcoming opponents. I was too slow to be a sprinter or a distance runner. I tried pole vaulting when we used aluminum poles instead of fiberglass and soared to the height of 9 feet, 6 inches and never placed at a track meet.

In my senior year, I gave up high school sports.

As a Marine "grunt," I ran a great deal.

As a college undergraduate, addicted to cigarettes, I ran some; as a high school teacher, I stopped running and used the excuse, "I don't have time; I'm too busy grading papers." As a college professor, I ran erratically.

In my early 40s, before I lost my vain sense of invulnerability and was humbled by my obese body, I didn't know what a marathon or a triathlon was.

In my mid-40s, a sense of mortality hit me. I saw a 200-pound, obese man in the mirror I did not like.

With the help of my wife, I quit smoking.

Then I became a "born-again runner." Running

transformed my life. Running humbled me. Running introduced me to new friends. Running brought me out of the isolation of the academic world and gave me a new reason for being.

Unlike T. S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock, I chose not to measure "out my life with coffee spoons." I chose to drink life to the fullest.

Because of my exercise regimen, I am alive today at 67 and not some photo and 15-inch column on a yellowed obituary page.

Running led me to swimming and cycling and the unimaginable, becoming a triathlete — granted a mediocre, middle-of-the-pack triathlete — but a triathlete.

Running gave me humility and self-acceptance. I'm not a great hero like Alfred, Lord Tennyson's Ulysses, but I am like Ulysses, "Of one equal temper of heroic hearts, / Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will / To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

I never envisioned myself as a sports journalist in my 40s. English professors fall victim to academic and pedantic prose, just the opposite of journalists.

Running led me to a career in writing I began in April 1991 with *Runner Triathlete News* and in June 1991 with *The Facts*.

Running made me a better writer and a journalist.

Non-runners don't understand why mediocre, middle-of-the-packers toe the line in a 5K, a marathon or a triathlon.

"The common man reaches excellence by making demands on himself," said Dr. George Sheehan, cardiologist and running guru, in "Personal Best" (Rodale Press, 1989). "What bothers people about running is our almost arrogant acceptance that through and in running we are fulfilling our

destiny."

In the words of Robert Brownings' Andrea del Sarto, "a man's reach should exceed his grasp, / Or what's a heaven for."

I give thanks to a God of my understanding for my 67 years and for the strength, health, character, courage and discipline to continue my exercise regimen. Running shaped my life in ways that nothing else could have.

"Life is a permanent boot camp," said Sheehan. "We must always be in training — and training not only for our bodies but our minds and spirits as well."

Running gets me through boot camp.

Carpe diem.

Bill Shaw's running column appears every other Monday in The Facts.