

Learning, running go hand in hand

By Bill Shaw

The Facts

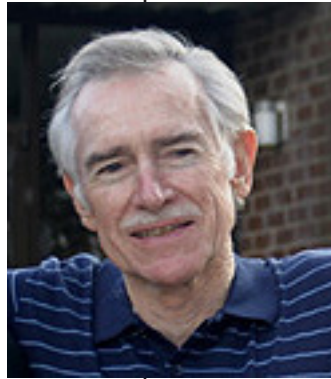
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“A little learning is a dangerous thing,” wrote Alexander Pope in his “An Essay on Criticism” (1711). His admonition is particularly relevant to runners. Many times we “learn” enough to train imprudently or too hard and injure ourselves. Some beginning and veteran runners get so discouraged they abandon running altogether.

As a self-coached runner, I have “a little learning.” I have learned about running from reading, observation and experience in almost 300 races, including 10 marathons and 28 triathlons. I also seek the advice of my peers in the Brazosport Area Road Runners Association, known as BARRA. My knowledge is limited. I am no expert.

Runners sometimes seek my advice about training and injuries like shin splints, plantar faciitis and other running maladies. I tell them what I know and refer them to physicians, specialists, Internet or print references and care providers or experts.

I didn’t learn much when I ran track in high school from 1953-56. Our coach issued cross-country shoes, shorts and track sweats and sent us on a 2-mile run every day before practice. I realized I was not a competi-



tive sprinter or strong long-distance runner. I turned to pole vaulting. My coach spent one day with me at practice, but for the most part I taught myself. (This was in the old days when poles were bamboo and aluminum and pits were sawdust.) I maxed out at 9 feet, 6 inches — enough to make the second string of the team. I never lettered.

When I became a “born-again” runner in my early 40s, I learned about distance running and training from *Runner’s World*. I devoured each issue. Dr. George Sheehan and Jeff Galloway were my coaches and mentors.

“Jeff Galloway’s *Book on Running*” (first edition, Shelter Publications 1984) became my running bible. “Sheehan’s

Running and Becoming: The Total Experience” (Warner Books 1978) became my prayer book. BARRA members were my counselors and source of inspiration. I religiously followed Galloway’s training schedule when I prepared for my first marathon.

I never sought a personal trainer or a coach. As my own coach, I realized I was a middle-of-the-packer. On the threshold of age 70, I accept my new role at the back of the pack. “A little learning” has sustained me as a recreational runner.

Beginners and experienced runners benefit from reading, learning and self-coaching. In addition, our running peers are

willing and enthusiastic to help us through injuries, motivational problems and disappointments.

We must be skeptical about the promises for weight loss, fitness, speed and athletic prowess with which TV commercials, magazines, books and fitness centers seduce us. For example, November “*Runner’s World*” serves up articles on “The Dreaded Doldrums and How to Beat Them,” “Get Fit Faster,” and “10 Tricks for Staying Motivated.”

I have been seduced by book titles like “*Triathloning in Four Hours a Week*,” “*Running Injury Free*,” “*Total Immersion: The Revolutionary Way to Swim Better, Faster and Easier*” and “*Bicycle Repair Manual: Everything You Need to Know to Keep Your Bike in Peak Condition*.” I discovered a “little learning” is really a “dangerous thing” when I turned my bike over to rest on its handlebars and took out my tools.

But if a little learning is a dangerous thing, no effort to learn is disastrous. Reading, self-coaching and practicing what we learn gives us a start; our experiences with our peers benefit us as well. I learned I cannot always go it alone. We learn what our limitations are and how to accept those limitations and to run as best we can with our limitations.

If a little learning motivates you to get out and pound the streets, roads and trails, it’s certainly not as dangerous as Pope suggests.

Bill Shaw’s running column appears in *The Facts* every other Monday. Contact him via e-mail