

By Al Morch | The Examiner Staff

BAY TO BREAKERS TESTS THE WISDOM OF AGES

Since the dawn of time, man has been chasing elusive goals. For over 100,000 people each year, that goal has been finishing The Examiner Bay to Breakers footrace. Some modern-day people who haven't run for a year — or have never even jogged — try to run the world-famous race. That's asking for achy-breaky parts of the foot bone's-connected-to-the-knee-bone variety.

The 7.46-mile (12K) dash, through the city streets, Golden Gate Park and finishing at the Pacific Ocean isn't until May 16, but if you're not in training now, you should be. In fact, according to medical experts, you probably should've started in February.

Conditioned athletes generally have no training problems because most understand pacing, says Dr. Kenneth Light, an orthopedic surgeon and co-founder of Saint Francis Memorial Hospital's Spine Center. But, he says, the neophyte will "go out the first day and try to run a marathon. That will get you into trouble."

Running itself, he says, is the best training for running, but your program should compensate for your physical shortcomings: for example, extra stretching and massaging beforehand of potential trouble spots.

"We don't like to tell people with back problems that they shouldn't run, because with many people running is almost like a religious experience," he says.

"You probably won't do permanent damage by running Bay to Breakers, but your back may be sore for a couple of days after. To keep discomfort to a minimum, you'll have to put yourself on a training program that will give your body a chance to recover between sessions," says Light, 42, a former long-distance runner who now swims for exercise. "Like everyone else, some of my parts are wearing out.

"Recovery time is different for each person, so listen to your body. You should work up to the distance slowly, then follow a regimen of one day of hard workout. Let's say 8 miles. The next day you rest. The following day run 4 miles, then, run 6 miles the next, then rest a day. Increase your distance to 7 miles the following day, then 8 miles on the seventh day. The next day rest. By varying the distances, you cut down on the repetitive stress," he says.

(Light quit running in 1985, after years of doing 10 miles a day from his Sausalito home across the Golden Gate Bridge and back.)

All the body joints take a pounding when you run — the knees especially, he says. Running up and down hills, especially where you have to bend, puts a lot of sheer stress on the knees and the lower back. "Don't include running hills in your training if you have a bad back; stay on flat surface. Once is enough for hills during the actual race," says Light.

As body conditions, Light recommends swimming because it builds up the muscles supporting the spine. Relieves stress and is easy on the body. Nordic tracks are OK for cardiovascular endurance, but not effective running muscle builders. Riding a mountain bike with an upright seat and upright handlebars on flat terrain is an excellent conditioning machine.

"If you have a bad knee, stay away from stair climber machines, and if you want to get a herniated disc fast, hop aboard a rowing machine. It's like bending a piece of wire back and forth until it breaks," says Light.

Although running has an impact on the total body, the feet take a real beating — especially as one gets older. With age, ligaments loosen and the foot has a tendency to splay apart, putting abnormal

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force on the joints, says Dr. William Olson.

“Running puts three times your body weight on the foot striking the ground,” says Olson, a podiatrist at the hospital’s Center for Sports Medicine.

“And the hills in the race don’t help either. Running uphill puts an especially heavy load on the Achilles tendon and heading downhill places a big strain on the front of the shin,” says Olson, in practice for 13 years. “Exercises such as heel raises and heel walking can be helpful in stretching and strengthening those parts, but overall, gradual progression training programs are more effective.

“Running a hill effectively has to be built one step at a time. Find a hill you can run at a certain pace without getting hurt, and build on it,” says Olson, 38, who once suffered a tibial stress fracture from running a course with extensive and severe hills. “It wouldn’t have happened if I had done more training.”

Proper running shoes and socks are prerequisites to running any event, and for that you should buy your equipment at stores that cater to the serious runner. Expect to pay \$75-\$100 for a decent pair of shoes.

Olson recommends Fleet Feet, On the Run in San Francisco, and Forward Motion in Danville as stores that will suggest the optimal shoe for any given runner.

“You should buy your shoes a couple of months in advance and break them in. By race day, you should have 50 miles on them,” says Olson. “And let’s not forget socks. Thorlo socks, for example, have been clinically proven to inhibit blister formation. What a blessing.”

Olson says most important is that the shoe be stable and have the ability to prevent excessive motion, such as overprinting (the ankle rolls in) or overspecialization (ankle rolls out).

“The shoe should have a fairly firm heel counter and midsole, flexibility in the forepart, with stiffness in the shank. Technological advances now permit a good shoe to weigh in at 10 to 11 ounces each. But don’t buy anything lighter than that,” says Olson.