

LONG FIXED-TIME ULTRAS: WHERE WALKERS BEAT RUNNERS!

By George Nelsen

I have always (since 1971) been a runner. Since 1999, I've been running ultras, from 50K all the way up to 72 hour races. As I've run more and more of them, it has become clear to me that race walkers stack up very well against runners. It really "hit me" when a team of Strider Race Walkers showed up to "do battle" at this year's VA 24 Hour Run for Cancer at Sandy Bottom Nature Park in Hampton on 21-22 April.

As the Race Director, I've observed many outstanding performances over the nine years the race has been held. But this year the accomplishments of the Striders' Walkers Team really stood out! The Team racked up the 4th most miles (just behind 3rd place), with two members (Hartley Dewey & Steve Shapiro) doing 75 miles, one doing 64 miles, and four doing over 30 miles. Only eight runners covered more than 75 miles. As I thought about it, I realized this should not have surprised me.

I've finished five 24 hour races (besides my own), two 48-hour races, and one 72-hour race, plus three 100-milers and a bunch of 50Ks and 50-milers. In all of the "fixed time events" (the 24, 48, and 72 hour races), several walkers participated. In most cases they ended up ranked quite high in the final standings. In the 2008 "Across the Years" 72 hour race (AZ), a race walker covered 204 miles and was only beaten by seven runners! In the 2010 FANS 24 Hour race (MN) three race walkers covered over 100 miles, earning the coveted Centurion Award, given to race walkers who walk 100 miles in 24 hours. Only seven runners beat them. In addition to doing well, the walkers all looked "fresh" and ready for more, unlike the runners who were hurting badly at the end (or quit before the time was up). At my 24 hour race in 2010, a 73 year old man walked 62 miles. He walked slowly, but he never stopped moving. In contrast, in the fixed distance ultras (50K, 50M, and 100M) walkers do not do as well, because the races are usually held on hilly, single track trails.

Why am I saying all this? Because it is now clear to me that, as runners age and slow down, or get injured, they should become "fast" walkers and start doing ultras. In doing so, they will have many more opportunities for outstanding performances, even into their 70s. They will have a "new lease on life!" Rather than beating ourselves up going ever more slowly, and encountering more injuries, we runners need to embrace walking.

Most runners have the mentality that walking is "bad" and only do so when forced. As an ultrarunner, I learned quickly that including walking breaks is the only way to succeed. The longer the event, the more walking is required. At some point in very long ultras, strong walkers will eventually overtake all but the very strongest runners. In fact, the history of ultras

goes back to the 1870s and 1880s in the US and England when great “pedestrians” of the day competed in races lasting up to six days, covering hundreds of miles!

Another thing about ultras is that most of the best performances are by those in their 40s, 50s, and even early 60s! This means that if you have finished earning all your PRs at the shorter races up through the marathon by your 40s or 50s, there is still plenty of time to work on ultradistance PRs, either as a runner/walker or “pure” walker.

So what are you waiting for? If you want to continue maintaining your high level of aerobic endurance, but you have gotten “old and slow,” or injured, just take up fast walking and do some ultras! You will have plenty of great company and be able to continue achieving goals well into your 70s (and maybe early 80s). There is a “whole new world” out there to explore!

By the way, the next Virginia 24 Hour Run for Cancer will be 20-21 April, 2013 at Sandy Bottom. There’s plenty of time to prepare!

George Nelsen
Race Director, VA 24 Hour Run For Cancer
PTC 1st Vice President