

Running, Aging, and Human Potential

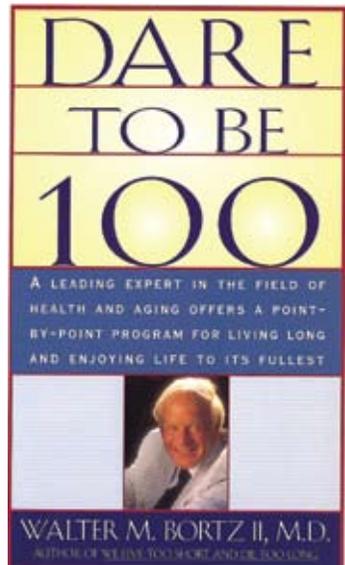
The longevity measuring stick is in the legs.

BY DR. WALTER BORTZ

I graduated from the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine in 1955 and have spent the major portion of the subsequent years in pursuit of my chosen field of geriatrics, the medical care of older persons. It has been a lifetime overflowing with gratification, both personal and scientific.

Implicit in my daily duties has been the opportunity to explore and define the human potential—not only the length of life but also its quality, its extent, and its content. I have written three books on aging (*We Live Too Short and Die Too Long*, *Dare to Be 100*, and *Living Longer for Dummies*) and over 100 scientific articles, the most significant being the one I wrote for the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 1982 titled “Disuse and Aging,” which importantly differentiated the often-confused elements of disuse and aging.

My conclusion, based on volumes of studies, including those from NASA concerning the profound negative biologic effects of weightlessness on our astronauts, was that the fitness contribution to human health represents a 30-year age offset. Stated in another way, a fit person of age 70 is biologically similar to an unfit person of 40—this having nothing to do with genes or medical care but due solely to physical conditioning.



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Where marathoning counts

A direct corollary to this professional commitment has been my experience as a marathoner. When I was 40, my life alpha figure, my father, died abruptly, and I was devastated; I became clinically depressed and couldn't sleep, think, or work. I was smart enough, however, to know that exercise is a basic treatment for depression. So I put on my Keds sneakers and cutoff jeans and chugged around the block. My depression quickly evaporated as the endorphins kicked in.

The Boston Marathon, then the only world-class running event open to the running-around slug, appealed to my Walter Mitty personality. So I entered and finished my first marathon in 1971 in 5 hours and 5 minutes, as I recall.

I must admit that I am a terrible runner; I feel as though I am running in army boots while the real gods of running flit past as though sporting wings on their ankles like classic Mercury.

An early, wonderful encounter in my running career was with Dr. George Sheehan, who was to become a very close friend. We bonded in many ways, except one: as a high school half-miler, George had committed himself to speed and winning; for me, this speed and winning was counterproductive, as I cared only about staying the course. We had endless discussions about this, and I feel he gradually came around to my perspective. One of my proudest achievements is the 1996 George Sheehan Award bestowed by the National Fitness Leaders Association. Both George and I addressed our own personal potential through running: "I run each day so that I do not lose the me I was yesterday and the me I might be tomorrow."

I participated in a substantial way in the management of his terminal illness of prostate cancer. We talked frequently on the phone, and I urged upon him Norman Cousins's precious advisory: "Accept the diagnosis, but reject the verdict." He initially resisted my counsel that he take morphine for his pain and transfusions for his anemia. Doctors make the worst patients, and George was particularly hostile to any intervention. But we dearly loved one another.

My advisories were finally accepted, and he lived a good year longer before dying on November 1, 1993, at age 74. He recorded his interaction in his last book, *Going the Distance: One Man's Journey to the End of His Life*.

For both George and me, marathoning was encoded into our living schedule. I run three times per week: three miles on Wednesday and Friday and 10 or more on Sunday. I like to think that on any given day I could run a marathon, slowly but surely.

A marathon a year makes you everlasting

I have maintained this habit now for 38 consecutive years, an annual marathon since 1971. I increase my mileage for the two months before the marathon, which

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I now use as my annual physical exam. Who needs an annual physical if you can run a marathon? And wonderfully, it's getting easier. No, I'm not going to die at mile 20.

My annual marathon has taken me to Marathon [Greece], Australia, London, Dublin, Beijing, and to Boston 15 times—my wife and I are the only married couple over the age of 70 to have completed Boston—and New York three times.

The New York City Marathon occupies a special spot in my archives of marathoning. Another running colleague was Dr. Paul Spangler of San Luis Obispo, California. Paul was in my father's medical school class at Harvard and therefore very senior to me. So with the connection with my dad, we naturally bonded. Like Doc Sheehan, Paul gave up his medical practice to preach fitness. He entered every senior running competition he could find. I claim that he has more gold medals than Nero. On one occasion, at a Stanford fitness-week celebration where he was always the star attraction, I asked him what his finishing time for the 10K road race in the morning was going to be. "Walter, I'm not sure of that," he replied, "but whatever it is, it will be a world record."

I aspire to such consequence, such acclaim that not many of us could reach for.

Paul continued his aging/fitness mission well into his 90s. I steered him around several minor medical inconveniences. He ran the New York City Marathon in 1989 and again in 1991 at ages 90 and 92 (with a time of 9:23). He and I started to nourish the possibility that he might become the first centenarian ever to finish a marathon. Dimitrion Yordanidis, 98, of Athens, holds the record for being the oldest human being to finish a marathon; he finished the Athens Marathon in nine hours.

I saw Paul in Palo Alto two weeks before he died at age 95 while he was out running his seven-mile course, which he ran three times a week. Our admiring group had lost our trailblazer.

Lacing up Paul's spirit

A pair of Paul's shoes was being sold at a running event, and I bought them, removed the laces, threaded them into my own running shoes, and ran the 2000 New York City Marathon in his honor in 5:19. He would have been 100 if he had made it; he didn't make it there, but his shoelaces did. I encountered many friends at that marathon, and we compared Spangler stories, still hoping to someday see the first 100-year-old marathoner.

My pulse quickened in 2008 when I read on the Internet that a 101-year-old man, Buster Martin, was going to run the London Marathon. I alerted my friends at *Runner's World* to the magnitude of this event. Buster completed the marathon in 8 hours and 46 minutes. But the *Guinness Book of World Records* quickly sleuthed

Creed for the Ancient Marathoner

1. Honor the run. Train enough, but not too much. Don't rely on yesterday's experience for today's challenge. Be true to the task. Know that you are the torchbearer for those younger. You show them not just what you can do but what they will be able to do. You show them their future.
2. Don't be surprised. Train in the heat and in the cold. Know how to drink and eat. Know where each step is taking you.
3. Don't take any extra weight along with you; be spare.
4. Be rested, be fresh, and arrive at the start ready for a full go. Know that each part of you is ready to go the full course.
5. Age is not an excuse. It is an advantage. Each of us has been up our personal hill more often than the younger runners. We are older, we have experienced more, we have more to give—and we understand more.
6. Don't make excuses. Don't rely on someone else. You are in charge. You alone can crest the rise, fight the fatigue, master the moment.
7. Although you are in charge of yourself, you are not alone. Your number increases. You run in the footsteps you have made—but also in the paths of Emil, Frank, Johnny, Grete, Clarence, George, and others. You tie your shoes with their laces. You are one with the heroes and heroines.
8. Don't compete with your yesterday. No one can defeat you. Be the best that you can be this day. By being your best today, you will prepare for being your best tomorrow.
9. Listen to the wisdom of your body. It is older. It has been tested. It knows how. Pay respect and learn from its teachings.
10. Have fun, don't take the run too seriously, be confident.

out that he was an imposter, a mere 94-year-old, and therefore never enshrined as the first centenarian marathoner. That honor still awaits.

Also in my personal pantheon of older long-distance standouts is Helen Klein, whose career reaches near-miracle status. Helen, now 86, ran the 2008 Kaiser Permanente Napa Valley Marathon in 5:36. When 79, she ran 4:38, at 80 she ran

4:31, and at 81 she ran 4:45. At age 66, Helen ran five 100-mile mountain races in a span of four months, including the Western States 100-Mile trail run. For 25 years, my wife and I annually give prizes to the oldest finishers of this most grueling of races. We figure that any youngster can run 100 miles, but 100 miles for a runner over 70 years of age is worthy of every acclaim and recognition.

Other notable older runners are John Keston, who ran 3:00:58 at age 71; Ed Benham, who ran a 4:17:51 marathon at age 84; and Mavis Lindgren, who sped to an 8:53:08 marathon finish at age 90.

So my role as a practicing physician with a particular bent for older people has been enriched by my immersion into the marathon world. I ran the ING New York City Marathon in 2008 in a blissful 8 hours and 10 minutes and loved every minute except for the start at the Verrazano Bridge, where a 41-mph headwind made me feel like molasses in a cold jar. But the wind abated, the sun shone brightly, and I steadfastly made my way around the five boroughs, stopping to enjoy the Emmanuel Baptist Church Gospel choir (which urged me to join in), then a coffee break on First Avenue, and later a Vaseline search to take care of chafed legs, since all the aid stations had long since closed and abandoned the still-struggling slow runners.

I ran every step and was passed by innumerable faster walkers. I never wavered: my good training had me fully prepared mentally and physically. I was proud that at age 78, I was able to keep it up for eight hours. I even passed a fellow straggler at Columbus Circle, giving him the double thumbs-up as I motored past.



Courtesy of John Keston



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▲ Elite senior runners John Keston (left) and Helen Klein (right) continue to set world records in their eighties.

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The elders of the NYC Marathon

At my current age, I was curious to see how my peers had fared in demonstrating human potential. The table below is a portrait of the New York City Marathon beginning in 1970, the date of the race’s origin. I’m very cheered by the fact that the number of runners over 70 is increasing. If we ancient duffers can show the rest of the world that you can keep going as you mature, perhaps the conclusion that they will draw is that they can do it, too.

The imperative message that all of this holds for the geriatrician, indeed for all doctors, is that as we age, the most important part in our body is not our heart or our lungs or our kidneys or even our brains—but our legs. As we keep them moving, the rest of the body pretty well takes care of itself.

No drug or any other maneuver offered to us by our annual \$2.3 trillion medical-care system can make that claim, which is a reality that we neglect at our collective peril.

And don’t forget Bortz’s Law, which holds: “It is never too late to start, but it is always too soon to stop.” 

NYC Marathon Age Results

Year	Age group	Men	Women
1970	70-74	Ted Corbett (only runner over 50)	
1978	70-74	6	0
1988	70-74	36	5
	75-79	9	0
	80-89	4	0
1998	70-74	81	14
	75-79	23	7
	80-89	11	3
	90-plus	1	0
2008	70-74	111	14
	75-79	28	6
	80-89	10	3
	90-plus	2	0