

Editorial: Why Long-Distance Running Makes Me a Better Actuary

By Ronald Poon-Affat

People who know me well are amazed at how disciplined I can be about not rambling on about my passion for long-distance running. Well, all good things must come to an end.

Yes, I am a running freak ... placing me far in excess of enthusiast, and well past fanatic. What entitles me to occupy this pigeonhole? Well: this year I am planning to run 30 half-marathons (13.1 miles) and two marathons, which means I am likely to accumulate more running mileage for the year (1,900 miles) than my car has on its odometer. I limit myself to only owning 10 pairs of running shoes at a time, have secured the coaching/mentoring services of a local elite runner and coach who won the Disney Marathon eight times, and most tellingly, was selected in 2014, by *Runner's World* magazine as having one of the world's 42 most awesome running-inspired tattoos.

Running challenges me on many levels. I compete hard, and race with the specific goal of placing in my age group; it's not just sheer love of the great outdoors and the camaraderie of sweaty, grunting strangers that gets me up at 4 a.m. on a Sunday morning to race.

Here is my top 10 list of the ways in which running has made me a better actuary ... and vice versa:

TIME CONSCIOUSNESS AND METICULOUSNESS ABOUT PLANNING

Running competitively makes you very time-conscious. Turning up late for a race is not an option when competing to place. Even being late by two minutes makes a huge difference in one's race time. While I am never going to add Olympic gold to my medal collection, I can certainly arrive on time, whether for a race or for internal or client meetings.

Running can also heighten awareness of the need for meticulous advance planning. This year I will have run two marathons: one in Tobago, which I ran in May, and the

second, the New York City marathon, in November. To be sure I was ready for these races, I started working on my training schedule in 2016.

If you can develop an effective marathon training plan, you can also develop an effective plan for a long-term work project. A long-term plan lets you know what needs to be done every day to achieve the goal. When you deliver a long-term project on time and in full, it may not be immediately obvious to your managers and colleagues how you achieved the goal. However, the quality of the plan's result—whether a work product or a respectable marathon finish—will reflect the quality of a meticulous, well thought-out and well executed plan.

READING AND RESEARCHING ABOUT WHAT YOU LOVE

Even when I am not running, I am thinking about it. For me, *Runner's World* is required reading, as well as the book *Born to Run* by Christopher McDougall, which deserves its accolades as one of the best running books in print today. As elite long-distance runner Bill Rogers says, "I always say that if the marathon is a part-time interest, you will only get part-time results."

Similarly, even when I'm not engaged in actuarial work, I'm still thinking about it. To pass the Society of Actuaries (SOA) exams requires plenty of study and preparation, and even after qualifying, actuaries still need to read and study in order to stay up to date with the industry trends and shifts. Staying up to date means you stay actuarially relevant, which is key to the continuing success of our profession.

VOLUNTEERING

As many of you know, I am an active volunteer for the SOA—it's work I truly enjoy, for it enhances me professionally while allowing me to pursue collateral interests (writing, editing ... running). In running, volunteer roles are extremely diverse, ranging from helping to organize, administer, or support races to coaching and mentoring beginner runners (my personal favorite). Volunteering makes life so much more rewarding: it promotes personal growth and self-esteem, increases your network, lets you learn to work with a range of diverse individuals and teams, and allows you to assume roles and responsibilities outside of your day-to-day work. To me, volunteering is one of the few things in life with little downside and near-limitless upside. I would heartily encourage each of you to volunteer—whether for the SOA, for an interest of yours, or even to mentor a children's sports team. You won't regret it.



VISUALIZING THE RESULT

For my New York Marathon run, I am already visualizing the entire five-borough course—the streets, the bridges, the turn onto Fifth Avenue and finally, the grand entrance to Central Park. Visualizing can also be valuable for actuaries: I always recommend to actuarial students that they try to visualize the result they are trying to calculate before they finish a numerical task. This helps them think about the driving factors that determine an end result and develop a gut feel for errors. For both runners and actuaries, visualization can improve preparedness, reduce mistakes and anxiety, heighten focus, and increase the probability of achieving the goal.

CULTIVATING A “GROWTH MINDSET”

No one is born a competitive long-distance runner. Endurance and mental toughness can be developed with proper training, determination and being open to being coached, mentored and receiving critical feedback. All of this is part of what is known as the “growth mindset,” which I wrote about in the March 2017 editorial. Dr. Carol Dweck, in her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (Penguin Random House LLC, 2006), distinguishes the growth mindset from what she calls the “fixed mindset” as follows: “In a fixed mindset, students believe their basic abilities, their intelligence, their talents, are just fixed traits. They have a certain amount and that’s that, and then their goal becomes to look

smart all the time and never look dumb. In a growth mindset, students understand that their talents and abilities can be developed through effort, good teaching and persistence. They don’t necessarily think everyone’s the same or anyone can be Einstein, but they believe everyone can get smarter if they work at it.” For actuaries, a growth mindset might be the most important trait to develop for success.

STRIVING FOR MORE

The great thing about long-distance running is that if you’re in reasonable health, you can progress from couch potato to running a 5K (five-kilometer race) in just three months, a 10K in six months, and then a marathon in 12 months. Once you have achieved your distance goal, you can then work on reducing your time. Running is one of the very few sports (perhaps the only one) that can deliver measurable results so quickly. The constant striving for improvement naturally crosses over to actuarial work. Can you deliver a better professional result? Greater accuracy, a deeper analysis, a strong, high-impact accompanying presentation, shorter delivery times, etc.? Yes, you can ... as long as you are willing to strive for more, and do the work.

COMMUNICATING MORE

If two strangers are sitting next to each other dressed for a race—sneakers, shorts, singlets, wrist wearables—you can be sure that before long, they are going to start chatting

about running. Long-distance running, at least in the U.S., is still a minority sport (just 0.5 percent of the U.S. population has run a marathon), so expect two runners, even if strangers, to strike up a conversation and share information. We can always learn something from one another's trials. By the same token, we actuaries—an even smaller population than marathon runners—can benefit from talking more with one another. I find I make the best improvements to my pricing models after discussing them face-to-face with other actuaries. In this day and age, it's so easy to sit in your home office with your laptop and smartphone and pretend you are connected with other people. My advice? Go out! Discuss the data you just received from an actuarial colleague, make new actuarial friends, talk about your challenges, and ... *alienus non diutius* (alone no longer).

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PUTTING MONEY IN PERSPECTIVE

One of Jerry Seinfeld's classic routines is about dogs and money. To quote: "Dogs have no money. Isn't that amazing? They're broke their entire lives. But they get through. You know why dogs have no money? No pockets." How does this relate to long-distance running and to our work as actuaries? In several ways. Some competitive runners might be wealthy from their running, but most run for personal satisfaction. Similarly, being recognized at work with raises and bonuses is great and can lead to a very comfortable life ... but money isn't everything. Happiness, satisfaction and personal fulfillment can come from many different sources, and it's up to each of us to cultivate them.

THE DIVERSITY OF DIVERSITY

I believe that part of why running is such a popular spectator sport is its extraordinary diversity. Runners come from every continent and nearly every nation competes in amateur and professional events; the crowds at the Olympics, the IAAF World Championships and the major marathons attest to this. Diversity is also important for the SOA: In the 2017–2021 Strategic Plan, the SOA has committed to cultivating membership diversity. As part of the SOA Board's Insight & Influence objective, it has committed to establishing a standing SOA Inclusion and Diversity Committee, which will determine the investments and programs that will have the greatest positive impact on inclusion and

diversity in our profession. I am positive this initiative will help the SOA to attract the best and brightest from a variety of educational backgrounds, cultures and experiences.

LOOKING THE PART

Most companies now permit casual dress Monday to Friday, but I think we all could benefit from dressing less casually. Just as one might not expect a world-class runner to show up for a race wearing torn sneakers, a stained t-shirt and ill-fitting shorts, actuaries can improve their self-presentation by dressing more professionally, especially if giving a presentation to a conference or for upper management. First impressions do count, and stellar work can only be enhanced when all presentation aspects are stellar.

In closing, I would like to quote Daniel Kahneman Behavioral Economist and co-author of *Thinking Fast and Slow*. He once told a journalist that laziness was the dominant characteristic of his friend Richard Thaler, the University of Chicago economist who coauthored with Cass Sunstein the book *Nudge*, and meant it as a compliment. His reasoning was that Thaler was only willing to work on things that are important. Thaler amended the observation by stating that he was only attracted to projects that were both important and fun. Both Kahneman and Thaler won the Nobel in 2002 and 2017 respectively for their contribution to Behavioral Economics.

I can readily identify with this characterization. I would probably not be as passionate about running as I am if I only ran in 5Ks or 10Ks. The marathon, for me, is an extremely important and extraordinary challenge—one that takes me out of my comfort zone and pushes me toward greater achievements.

I think we all entered the very challenging actuarial profession for similar reasons—that the work is both important and, for us, fun ... and gives us inspiration to push ourselves toward greater achievements.

Based on my top 10 observations of the intersection where actuarial science meets running, there might be an emerging runner within each actuary (and, perhaps, a potential actuary within each runner?). The good news about testing this theory is that taking the first step means only lacing up your sneakers and taking a spin around the block. Enjoy the journey! ■



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