

Maintaining Life Long Fitness Goals For the New Year

By Tony Reed

As the holiday season approaches, many people begin formulating their physical fitness goals. Whether it's to lose fifteen pounds of fat or build five pounds of muscle, the reality is that many fitness goals fall by the wayside as the year progresses. Also, many of these goals are short term fixes to long term problems.

During magazine and newspaper interviews, one of the most frequently asked questions is "What's the secret to maintaining a fitness program for over 30 years?" This is also a question that I've also asked long time runners, walkers, and bicyclists. These are the everyday people that you've watched running or walking past your home or in the local park for the last several years. For us, fitness isn't a New Year's resolution; it's a way of life. It's built into our everyday living, like watching the six o'clock news or week-end sports.

Here are a few of our secrets.

1. Select a life-long sport that you'll enjoy. If you don't enjoy running, try walking. If you don't know how to swim, but always wanted to learn, take lessons. You're never too old to learn a new sport. Also, don't be afraid of being a multi-sport athlete, especially if you get bored doing one sport. My wife, Deborah, was a non-athlete. She completed her first triathlon a couple days after her 52nd birthday. The race consisted of a 300-meter swim, 14-mile bike ride, and 3.1-mile run. This was her first (ever) athletic completion. Now, this event has become her annual goal.

2. Select an activity that you can do alone or without assistance. If you require or rely on a partner, you may skip a workout because your partner isn't available. Your partner's excuse becomes your excuse. This can be a problem with such sports as tennis, basketball, football, or racquetball. When you pick a solitary-type of sport, such as walking, swimming, weightlifting, or biking, it becomes a "bonus" when you run into a training partner during your workout.

3. Select an activity that you can do year-around. If not, pick a combination of activities, based on the seasons. For example, you can ride bikes in the summer and run in the winter. Or get an indoor treadmill for running or a stationary wind-trainer for your bike. This keeps you training throughout the winter months. I enjoy running because it's simple, doesn't require a lot of equipment, may be done year around, and is easy to do while out of town. In addition to running, I perform pushups and sit ups to help build upper body strength and a stronger midsection or core. These are easily performed in my hotel room without any special equipment.

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4. Have a strong moral reason to workout. A moral reason is so strong, that your closest friend, spouse, or children can't talk you out of your exercise. For example, I was diagnosed with a pre-diabetic condition as an eight year old. I was supposed to go on insulin as a teenager. Fortunately, I became involved in high school sports and didn't have to take insulin. During my high school and college years, a co-worker, Bill, lost his eye to glaucoma, his toes and leg to diabetes, and, ultimately his life. I don't believe he was over 40 years old.

At 53 years old, I'm still not on insulin and not a diabetic. Fear of losing my eyesight and limbs are my moral reasons to continue exercising. I wanted a better quality of life

5. Identify major quarterly goals. Many athletes have specific events that they'll attend every year, such as a bicycle rally or road race. This includes the "Hotter than Hell" bicycle rallies and the Turkey Trot. One of my goals has been to participate in at least one long distance race every quarter. The Dallas White Rock and Ft. Worth's Cowtown Marathons are in December and February, respectively.

I've run each of these races about 20 times during the past 26 years. Training for December's White Rock forces me to start getting in shape in August. Due to the Texas heat, I start very slowly. The training program always involves a long run during the Thanksgiving holiday. Thus, the seasonal eggnog, apple pies, and stuffing are burned off in one run.

Long runs are also scheduled around Christmas, New Years, and Valentine's Days in preparation for February's Cowtown Marathon. My other goal has been to run at least 15 miles on my birthday in July. These marathon quarterly goals keep me fit during two of the highest weight gaining quarters.

My wife and I even started a new tradition by participating in a Turkey Trot event on Thanksgiving morning. (This also is our excuse to avoid working in the kitchen on Thanksgiving morning!!!)

6. Use a 365-day wall calendar to track your progress AND missed days. This helps you to visualize both progress and regress. When I initially started my life-long fitness program, one of my goals was never to go more than two days in row without at least a 30-minute workout. It didn't matter whether the workout was running in place, walking around the block or mall, dancing, or splashing/swimming in a pool. Every day that I missed a workout, I drew an "X" through that day. By placing the wall calendar in a highly visible place, like a refrigerator or bedroom door, it's a constant reminder not to skip a day.

The calendar may also be used to monitor your progress and record injuries. By reviewing your previous workouts on the calendar, you may be able to find the injury's possible cause.

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7. Reward your fitness activities with traveling. Many people celebrated their birthdays by travelling out of town to participate in fitness events. Still others sought out fitness events during family vacations and business trips. For example, my first overseas marathon was completed while on a European business trip.

One of my goals was to run a marathon on my birthday. Fortunately, my 50th birthday was on a weekend. There were only two marathons held on that day; the Leadville (CO) and Australia's Gold Coast Marathons. So, I celebrated in Australia!!! Completing this marathon gave me the courage to run marathons on all seven continents, including Antarctica

8. Establish a "Frequent Fitness Mileage Rewards" Program. As you track your fitness mileage or minutes, consider establishing mileage or minutes-based rewards. For example, if you live in Dallas and ran, walked, or biked, about 250-miles, spend a weekend in Houston or eat at the Houston restaurant. Houston is 247 miles from Dallas. At 526 miles, consider eating at your favorite New Orleans-style restaurant or visit the city. Or at 800 miles, have dinner at the Cheesecake Factory, which originated in Atlanta.

Don't forget to schedule a "special" workout to offset that special meal!!!

9. Establish a minimum monthly goal. This goal, when combined with the aforementioned "no more than two missed days" objective, kept me on target. This monthly minimum goal was also written at the top of the calendar. My life-time fitness goal has been to run or walk at least 100 miles a month. This may seem like a long distance. However, it's about 3 miles a day or one-hour of watching a television program. Thanks to VCR's and DVR's, you can record your program to watch after your workout.

I'm able to meet my monthly minimum by running three or four days a week. I may run twice during the workweek for three to nine miles and run a total of twelve to eighteen miles during the weekend. I've supplemented my running by going on walks with my wife and dog.

10. Buy a good pair of running or walking shoes AND track the mileage for each pair. Go to a sports specialty store (and not a department store) to purchase your shoes. The salesperson should be an experienced athlete, not a high school student on a part-time job. Be prepared to spend as much, if not more, on the shoes as you would on a nice pair of dress shoes. Remember, your feet support your entire body, if the shoes are unstable, so is your body. Only use these shoes for your workout, not for walking the dog or cleaning around the house. That represents unrecorded mileage.

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Record the date that you acquired the shoes on the aforementioned wall calendar. This helps you track the mileage. The more you weigh, the faster the shoes wear out. At 200 pounds, I typically go through a pair of running shoes in about 275 miles. They still look like new after this distance. However, the cushioning is gone. At this mileage, I toss them in the washing machine and donate them to a local homeless shelter. You may use these old shoes to walk the dog or clean up around the house.

11. Join an organization that supports your fitness objectives. Local running or walking clubs are great places to get advice and support from practicing fitness experts. The annual membership dues about equals the cost of two dinners at a nice restaurant. We started the National Black Marathoners Association (www.BlackMarathoners.org) to support walkers and runners, as well as multi-sport athletes, such as triathletes. We meet annually at different races around the country. Many of our members plan their vacations (i.e. fitness rewards) around attending our summits. We've met near St. Louis, New Jersey/New York, Cleveland, and Phoenix. This year, we're gathering over 500 participants at Cowtown Marathon on February 27 and 28 in Ft. Worth, TX. There are races for people of all experience and distance levels; from a 5K (3.1 miles) to a 50K (31 miles).

12. Get a thorough physical exam by a physically fit physician before starting a workout program. A fit physician may be better able to relate to your goals. Also, tell the physician about your goals and get their support. (Even my dentist is a runner.)

13. Don't start on New Year's Day. There's a lot of pressure to start many major life changing events on this one day of the year. If you have a strong moral reason to start a fitness program, why not start today? Get the wall calendar and shoes. Schedule an appointment with your physician. Drive your car around the neighborhood and note the distances of your potential walking or running routes.

14. Start slowly. It took you 15 years to get out of shape, don't think it will take you 15 days or weeks to get back in shape. So, take it slow and easy in the beginning to build up your endurance.

15. Have fun!!! Your workout should provide a mental relief, in addition to a physical outlet. It's your life long companion.