

## Opinion | Learning to Run – at 70

The retirement activity that changed my life was one I never thought I'd be cut out for

By Thelma Fayle  
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Thelma Fayle celebrates after finishing her first 5K run.

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When a nearby rec centre recently advertised a 12-week running clinic as preparation for a five or 10 K race, I decided to sign up as a celebration of turning 70. I have never run in my life or been athletic, but I wanted to learn something completely new.

The race I was aiming for was the [Esquimalt 5K](#) run on April 11th — in my 70<sup>th</sup> year.

I also wanted to do it safely. We all know seniors who are waiting for hip and knee surgeries and the course seemed to offer a wise approach. With the stresses on our health care system, I wanted to do as much as possible to get fit and keep my impact on it to a minimum. I have spent a good part of my leisure time immersed in wonderful courses and books but have decided I can probably keep up with enjoyable reading ... and learn to move my aging bod, too.

Of course, I was the oldest in the class; an eight-year-old boy and I were the youngest and oldest — and also the slowest. But we got through our first class, were noticeably better by our second, and we met runners of all ages who were friendly and encouraging. Every conversation offered helpful information. Unbeknownst to me, the almost-brand-new shoes I picked up at the thrift shop were called “cross-trainers” and were not ideal for running; especially for someone who is knock-kneed. Helpful.

I walked across town to the local running shoe store wearing my cross-trainers, and helpful staff suggested options. Three pairs later, I found some that felt great. I walked home wearing the new ones and had a perfect chance to compare the old and the new. The experience gave me a clear sense of the value of finding the right running shoes.

I always thought some people were just naturally “runners” and the rest of us were regular creatures whose running experience consisted of getting out of breath while sprinting half a block to catch a bus. I didn’t realize you start with increments. Run two minutes, walk for four minutes. And then move up to a three-minute run; and so on. I did homework-runs between classes and was surprised when I could actually run two blocks. My breathing got easier with each short run. There was a certain freedom — and even an enchantment — to the experience that has nothing to do with competing or winning. I generally felt a little more alert, and happy to know I could adapt to something new. By the third class, running began to feel really fun. I could relate to my two-year-old nephew, who, having just recently learned to walk, seems to have suddenly progressed to running everywhere — and is having a blast; as am I.

Every class at the Esquimalt Recreation Centre is full of learning as guest speakers ... a physiotherapist, a fitness instructor, a yoga teacher, a kinesiology student (Nick) who has done a great job of organizing the clinic, and several runners who offer rich perspectives on the benefits of running.

When my hip got sore after a run, I immediately reverted to: *’Oh rats, I am too old for this. Maybe I won’t be able to finish the program.’* But I decided to postpone the doom scenario and recalled the physiotherapist’s advice not to look at body issues in isolation and to take time to rest. I figured out the soreness came from my bad habit of sitting cross-legged for hours every night while playing scrabble with my husband — combined with the new practice of running. To test my suspicion, I stopped sitting cross-legged and the pain disappeared in a few days.

Another day, after over doing strengthening exercises, I had sore muscles. I just relaxed for a day, took a hot bath, used a heating pad ... *and my muscles recovered.* New ideas learned in the clinic are helping me move forward.

Week by week, the process felt safe and the experience constantly surprised me. My lungs seem to have a larger capacity and my muscles are slowly getting fitter. My body is continually adjusting. I am learning that I am stronger than I thought and that running is surprisingly more mental than physical. I am beginning to imagine myself as “a runner”; at least one who has taken first steps.

I woke up on race day and was nervous. My toe was sore and I had a scrape on my knuckle. I wondered if I should just stay home and be content that I went through the program. I don't need to prove anything to anyone. Right? My sweet husband reminded me that I would be fine and would likely have fun.

While running the last hundred yards, my face was red and I was huffing and puffing. One of the kind volunteers on the side of the road shouted out support: “You're doing great 1393; you have great pace,” he said. I am sure I looked a wreck. And then I saw a group of half a dozen of my classmates all waiting just over the finish line. They were jumping up and down and cheering me on. What a lovely sight! The minute I ran over the line I felt a wonderful sense of satisfaction while we all high-fived each other. To tell you the truth I nearly cried.

There was a booth set up to take pictures and I was thrilled to capture the moment. One of my instructors told me the relaxed post-run feeling was due to naturally produced increased levels of [endocannabinoids](#) in our bloodstream. It felt whopping great. |

While being careful not to do harm, I am learning that my old bod and mind are capable of doing more when pushed a little. It seems I still have choices even though I have never been athletic. I just want to toss this perspective out in case other boomers might be curious enough to consider the possible fun of running on an untravelled path. Aging does not have to be a downward spiral of physical decline.

And now that I know how to run, I will be able to burn off calories from my homemade bread and my husband's incredible cooking.

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