

26.2 miles of heaven — or hell

You may think they're crazy, but more and more people are hitting the marathon trail

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Some do it just for fun, believe it or not. Others try it to attain or maintain a high degree of fitness. Some take to the paved course to meet a personal challenge.

In some instances, people want to gain a bit of fame.

In the end, though, it's all in the name of running a 26.2-mile course. What makes this distance sacred among the running fraternity is it represents a complete marathon race.

"There are more marathon races than ever before and the number of competitors has definitely increased," said John De Finney, founder of the Markham Centaurs Running Club and a veteran of 30 marathons.

Gaining his marathon baptism in 1978 in Sudbury, the 55-year-old Markham resident attributes the sport's profile to its benefits.

"Many people going into marathons today are doing so for the health benefits as well as for the challenge," said Mr. De Finney.

Mr. De Finney prefers shorter races but continues to be intrigued by marathons because of the "exhilaration and challenge of training and the ambience, excitement and camaraderie on the day of the event."

"It's one of the few events where every competitor is cheering for



FILE PHOTO

About 900 people took part in the Markham Stouffville Hospital cardiac care half marathon in Unionville last month. "I didn't realize what I was getting into. It was a whole new world for someone like me, who was a stay-at-home mom," runner Rhonda Burke, 42, said.

each other to do well," he said.

Helen Thompson, 67, can vouch for that. She received encouragement from runners and spectators during her first event, this year's Scotiabank Waterfront Marathon in Toronto.

Taking up running last year to keep fit after retiring, the Ballantrae resident completed the course with her 30-year-old son, Ian, in five and a half hours.

She raised \$1,000 in pledges for the Rose of Sharon Services For Young Mothers in York Region.

"What got me through the marathon were the people who made pledges for me," she said. "That was the real motivator."

Rhonda Burke was searching for a challenge five years ago after 15 years as an Aurora fitness instructor.

The 42-year-old mother of three joined a group of runners who regularly trained by running 30K as a warm-up.

"I didn't realize what I was getting into. It was a whole new world for someone like me, who was a stay-at-home mom," she recalled.

She said she was lucky to meet and train under Hugh Cameron, who was coaching a group of elite marathon runners before creating

the Newmarket Huskies Track Club. Ms Burke has run three marathons, with her best result, a 3:40 three years ago in Kitchener, qualifying her for the prestigious Boston Marathon.

"(Boston) was the most amazing experience. Not being a competitive athlete, to run in this race is the closest experience to feeling like it's an Olympic event. It took your breath away because of the amount of spectators. You were like a celebrity," she said.

"It's like the Mount Everest of running," said Jerry Kooymans, a 50-year-old Markham resident who has run five marathons.

Mr. Kooymans ran his last marathon in 1981 after recovering from groin surgery. He hoped to represent Canada at an Olympics but has found fulfillment running shorter races and setting Canadian masters age group records in the mile and half marathons.

"These races are just as fun to do and you might not get hurt and they are just as healthy," he said.

Running 26.2 miles might seem like a long distance.

In fact, it is.

What it takes, suggested Ms Thompson, is time, commitment

and, for newcomers, lessons from experts.

Enrolled in a learn-to run class at the Running Room, a Unionville sporting goods store, Ms Thompson progressed from doing 5-kilometre events last year to a 10K, half marathon and a full marathon in September.

Ms Thompson credited much of her success to her coach, Ray Lim, and others in her class.

"From the staff to the runners, everyone was supportive and the camaraderie is fantastic," she said.

Ms Burke also believes a support group is critical if one hopes to complete a marathon.

If not for coaching and the group she was in, her appearance at the Boston Marathon two years ago wouldn't have been a reality.

"Running with a group is safer to do and you tend to go faster. But I had success because I had a fabulous coach. I had more coaching than talent."

Ms Burke and others say completing a marathon takes plenty of physical and mental preparation.

"To be successful you need to do a lot of mileage. It's hours and hours of running," she said.

Having participated in four marathons, John Fisher believes the secret is begin preparing early.

"Assuming you are in good physical shape, you need about 20 weeks of lead time," the 46-year-old Markham resident said.

"Each week you increase your mileage and increase your long runs. Most need to run 50 miles a week leading up to a marathon."

WHY DO IT?

"Aerobically fit individuals reduce their risk of heart disease and strokes, diabetes, some types of cancer, osteoporosis as well as other degenerative diseases," Markham marathoner John DeFinney said.

"In addition, running is a social sport and is a great stress reliever."

"And for the time spent, running gives you the best aerobic workout of any activity."

"It's easy to do and it requires little training and preparation, and equipment is cheap. You can run in any climate at any time of day."

WANT HELP TO GET GOING?

Long-distance running courses are offered at several stores specializing in running apparel including four York Region Running Room outlets (Unionville 905-479-6253, Newmarket 905-898-8110, Richmond Hill 905-764-7255 and Vaughan 905-417-6860) and Running Free in Markham, (708 Dennison St., 905-477-7871).

Newcomers would best be served by attending these classes because of their highly structured nature, said John De Finney, founder and past president of the Markham Centaurs running club. Just be aware they usually have a registration fee.

Another option is clubs, including the Markham Centaurs (905-294-3668) or Newmarket Huskies Track Club (905-836-4916).

Mr. De Finney suggests experienced runners might feel more comfortable taking this route since they can train with others at the same pace.

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