

To Each His Own

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Instead of having a real job like most grown-ups, I get to travel around every couple of weeks putting on racewalking clinics for groups all over the US and Canada.

All kinds of folks show up, but I wound up with a particularly diverse group at a gathering in Dallas recently. For the most part it was the usual mix of men and women in their 30s-60s. But they were joined by Blessed Walker, a 6-year-old age- group prodigy, and 84-year-old Fan Benno, a World Veterans Games gold medallist.

Except for their boundless energy, the two seemed to have very little in common. But seeing them working together all weekend with similar goals of getting better, getting faster, drove home to me one of the reasons we all run and walk: It's for everyone; it's something we can begin at any age, and expect to do for the rest of our lives.

Some of us start very young, others, like Fan—or our own Daphne Devorak and Jimmy Matthews—don't get started until much later in life. But training and racing are things we can all enjoy and continue to do for a lifetime.

Our chosen form of athletic pursuit also knows no racial or socio- economic bounds. Some of us are well-to-do, others not so; some are black, some are white. But we all get together on the weekends in shorts, T-shirts and running shoes—on the roads as equals. Racewalking aside, there are no biased calls, no style points, it's just us—no matter who we are—against the clock. And before the clock, we're all equals.

The same can be said with regard to our varying abilities as athletes. Some runners and walkers have lots of "God-given" talent and Olympic aspirations, like Blessed who admits she's a little too young to go to the Olympics now, but "maybe when I'm ten." Others are just looking for a way to lose weight, get fit or extend life. But we all toe the starting line together as equals (at least until the gun goes off!) Sure, some of us—okay, all of us!—get left in the dust by the Olympians, but at least we are there together at the start, and we finish at the same finish line. We may not share the same skills, but we can share the same events, like the ATR, the Senior Bowl Charity Run, or for some of us, the Boston Marathon. How many people can say they went up against Tiger Woods in the Masters, or against Michael Jordan in the NBA Finals? Not very many. But we all can say we "competed against" Eddy Hellebuyck or Bill Rogers at the ATR. Now, Bill and Eddy might not see it the same way, but there we are, racing against each other and the clock, working our hearts out towards the same finish line.

Even when competing against the best in the world, we can all win. No matter if we come in half an hour behind the race winner, we can still feel the same sense of accomplishment when we have a good race, set a personal record, or simply complete the distance.

I've been involved in road-racing and track and field for almost 25 years now. I've lived in a lot of places and been involved with a lot of running and walking clubs. And what impresses me most is the ability of clubs like the Port City Pacers to bring so many diverse types of people together: young, old, black, white, rich, poor, fast, slow. We're all in this together.

I can't help but think back to Blessed and Fan training together in Dallas. I'm about three decades too late to aspire to be like Blessed Walker. But even though I'm not in any big hurry to get "old," if I ever do, I want to be just like Fan (or Daphne or Jimmy...), spending my "golden years" not just watching the world pass me by, but getting out there and mixing it up with other athletes, young and old. Amplector diversitas! n



Blessed (she's the short one), Coach Dave, and Fan.

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