Distance racing sees participation spike

Studies show Gen Zers are 'leading contributor to that growth'

Steve Dorfman Palm Beach Post

USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

WEST PALM BEACH, FL - Distance running is having a moment - and it's largely being led by Generation Zers, whose participation has been on the rise since the pandemic ended.

In recent years, we've seen high-profile celebrities such as Harry Styles, Colin Farrell, Kevin Hart, Ashton Kutcher, Jennifer Connelly and Chelsea Clinton, among others, complete full marathons. In turn, races of all distances nationwide are seeing a dramatic spike in participation.

From 2021 to 2024, according to Road Runners Club of America, the percentage of finishers ages 20-29 has increased from 16.4% to 24.5% in the marathon, 17.1% to 26.2% in the half marathon, 13.9% to 20.6% in the 10K, and 12.3% to 17.2% in the 5K.

In addition, there's been a marked membership increase in running clubs across the nation.

"Run clubs are replacing dating apps," Runner's World said in 2025. "Celebs like Diplo and blink-182 drummer Travis Barker are starting their own run clubs. Around 7% of runners surveyed for Running USA's annual report in 2023 stated that they were part of a running club. And Strava saw a 59% increase in new clubs in 2024, according to the tracking platform's annual Year in Sport report, with Gen Z as the leading contributor to that growth."

TikTok and Instagram are chock-full of fitness and beauty influencers documenting their training and race-day experiences - and their followers are taking note. This has led to more shoe and apparel brands targeting their distance running gear to younger consumers, further fueling the rise in the sport's participation rates.

Seeing so many young adults lean into becoming endurance athletes is heartening – especially when considering how beneficial this could be for decreasing the nation's obesity rates.



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That said, there are some aspects of becoming endurance athletes that young runners - especially women must stay vigilant about to ensure they can participate in their favorite road races for years and decades to come.

Risks of under-fueling the body

We all know that proper nutrition, including sufficient caloric intake, is the foundation for any kind of athletic pursuit. This is especially true for endurance sports: running, cycling, swimming and the like.

Yet, regardless of one's age, gender or ability level, there's a perpetual risk for endurance athletes to under-fuel their body's basic caloric needs. When that happens, the athlete becomes vulnerable to a syndrome known as Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport, or REDs.

The term was introduced by the International Olympic Committee in 2014. While it was originally coined to expand on an existing condition for elite competitors called "the female athlete triad" comprising irregular menstruation, loss of bone mass and disordered eating "Around 7% of runners surveyed for Running USA's annual report in 2023 stated that they were part of a running club. And Strava saw a 59% increase in new clubs in 2024, according to the tracking platform's annual Year in Sport report, with Gen Z as the leading contributor to that growth."

Runner's World

- in recent years experts have stressed that REDs can affect anyone.

According to a CNN report, the condition "occurs when an athlete of any gender has overtrained and/or under-eaten for a prolonged period in an attempt to improve their performance, often without knowing the dangers of failing to compensate for the energy they expend in training and racing."

Potential complications from REDs include fatigue, weight loss, missed or irregular menstruation, hormonal problems; digestive problems, bone density loss, stress fractures, repeated muscle or connective tissue injuries, cold intolerance, low sex drive, frequent illness, slow heart rate, low blood pressure, decreased athletic performance, hair loss, trouble focusing, irritability, depression and anxiety

Identifying - and treating - REDs

Many athletes suffering from REDs may have other mental-health complications that contribute to the condition.

Body image issues and disordered eating habits are the most commonplace. It also happens frequently to folks who put intense pressure on themselves and/or are perfectionists.

In those instances, the athlete may benefit from a multidisciplinary treatment approach that includes education and consultations with experts such as nutritionists, sports psychologists, sport-specific coaches, and sports medicine doctors.

Another factor perhaps contributing to REDs is how many people nowadays are taking GLP-1 medications to control their weight.

Those on GLP-1 medications usually have decreased appetites, as well as decreased overall interest in and enjoyment of food. It's easy to see how those on GLP-1 medications who become involved in an endurance sport may inadvertently end up suffering from REDs during their training.

For most recreational athletes suffering from REDs, the condition can usually be rectified by eating a wellplanned, nutrient-dense diet and incorporating more rest days into the training program. That's where consultation with the nutritionists, coaches and health care experts can be so bene-

The bottom line is that participation in an endurance sport should be a fun and rewarding pastime – one that contributes to, rather than detracts from, overall health and well-being.









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