

SPORTS

Simplicity. It's a modern conundrum that we have to work to find a little piece of it. We have to leave projects undone, say "no," turn the phone off, stand still, escape traffic and silence the constancy of our internal monologues.

At best, we are able to eke out pockets or serendipitously stumble across moments that inspire calm, that don't cost anything and that feel good.

For some, that sense of simplicity is found running.

"It's an inexpensive, entry-level sport. Anyone can do it. All it'll cost you is a pair of shoes," says June Kansopon, outreach coordinator for Portland Frontrunners.

President Don Robinson explains: "Running is kind of an inward thing. You get the heartbeat pumping, and you're so connected to what's around."

But it's not always connection to the scenery or thoughts within that keep many runners going. Sometimes, collecting the will to step out the front door is the hardest piece of the puzzle to find. Anyone from the seasoned runner to the novice has stared out at the drizzling rain and dark skies and wondered, "Do I have to?"

As club member Eileen O'Connor puts it, "When I saw people running I wondered what they were running from."

And both Kansopon and Robinson have lamented the difficulty of running alone. "When a person trains it can get monotonous and being with people can break that up," Robinson says.

And that's where this club steps in. "Frontrunners is a good social outlet, and I like having that incentive. That's what life is all about: sharing your time and experiences with other people," Kansopon says.

Frontrunners is an international running club for sexual minorities that began 28 years ago in San Francisco. Since then it has



Portland Frontrunners gear up for running every Tuesday, Saturday and Sunday

Out front

Portland Frontrunners find peace in a pair of running shoes

BY MELISSA SAYLER

branched out with affiliates in most major U.S. cities as well as Europe, Canada, Australia and South Africa.

Portland Frontrunners began in the early '80s and enjoyed several years of popularity before membership began to dwindle and the club disbanded. When Robinson returned to Portland from Boston in 1999, he joined with the Adventure Group to make running one of its Saturday morning activities. Last September, Robinson, Kansopon, Damon Schmidt and Brian Craig of the Saturday morning running group spun off to resurrect Portland Frontrunners.

Since then, the group has tried to focus on making running accessible for all levels and interests. Experienced marathoners, triathletes, walkers, trotters or "newbies" can

choose from trail runs, distance runs, short runs (ending with brunch!), trips to San Francisco for the "Little Black Dress" run or adventurous outings that require beer drinking or clawing one's way up the muddy face of Ski Bowl on a summer afternoon.

Schmidt recalls his journal entry from the "Kevin's Cup X" adventure race last November: "This nasty lil' trailfest served up a variety of challenges: mud, creeks, trails, brutal ankle-twisting switchbacks, bone-jarring downhill, lung-searing uphill and more. This was no cutesy downtown commercial road race! The real fun came later during the hot-dog half-mile and the ultimate beer mile!"

Kansopon has her own adventurous war stories: "A group of friends and I did this race called the Ski Bowl Scramble... A bunch of us ran and crawled up and down the mountain. It was a horrible climb marked with stunning views of Mount Hood from the top. My thighs and lungs were burning, I couldn't think straight, there were times when I wanted to cry. But when we all cheered for each other into the finish line, we were elated and celebrated with cold microbrew from the kegs."

Contrast those races with the laid-back, three- to six-mile Saturday morning runs along the Portland waterfront.

After taking a count of who's going to brunch after the run, faster people take off, leaving the rest to their occasionally breath-challenged conversations and running

rituals—like not being able to turn around until you touch a specific piece of pavement at the end of a certain path or the ever-popular avoidance of stepping on sidewalk seams. These are the necessary habits that help runners stay focused and honest, keeping them from quitting too easily or cutting corners.

Also, all of this intimate sharing of idiosyncrasies allows people to forge a community with other lez-bi-gay-trans people with interests outside the bar scene.

As Kansopon puts it: "I ran with Frontrunners because it was the first gay organization I finally found on campus that I could relate with and express my identity. Because...One: I have to be myself—runner and now triathlete—not softball player, not barfly, not poker player. Two: lesbian. I needed to get out and make more gay friends. Three: to feel connected with where I live. Running, and meeting people through it, gives me a sense of community."

Not surprisingly, many of the Portland Frontrunners are recent transplants—from California, Pittsburgh, Chicago and Texas, to name a few. Most of them were familiar with the organization as a way to meet new people. "I'm happy to say that my first and best friends in Portland have come from this group," Schmidt says.

Travelers also look for Frontrunners when they visit new cities. The international Web site lists clubs around the world. Robinson says the Boston group offers housing to out-of-town Frontrunners who come in for races like the Boston Marathon.

Craig says he's run with various Frontrunner groups—Orlando, Gainesville and Tampa, Fla.; Washington, D.C. "Everyone has always been very accepting and friendly to the new guy who shows up for a run."

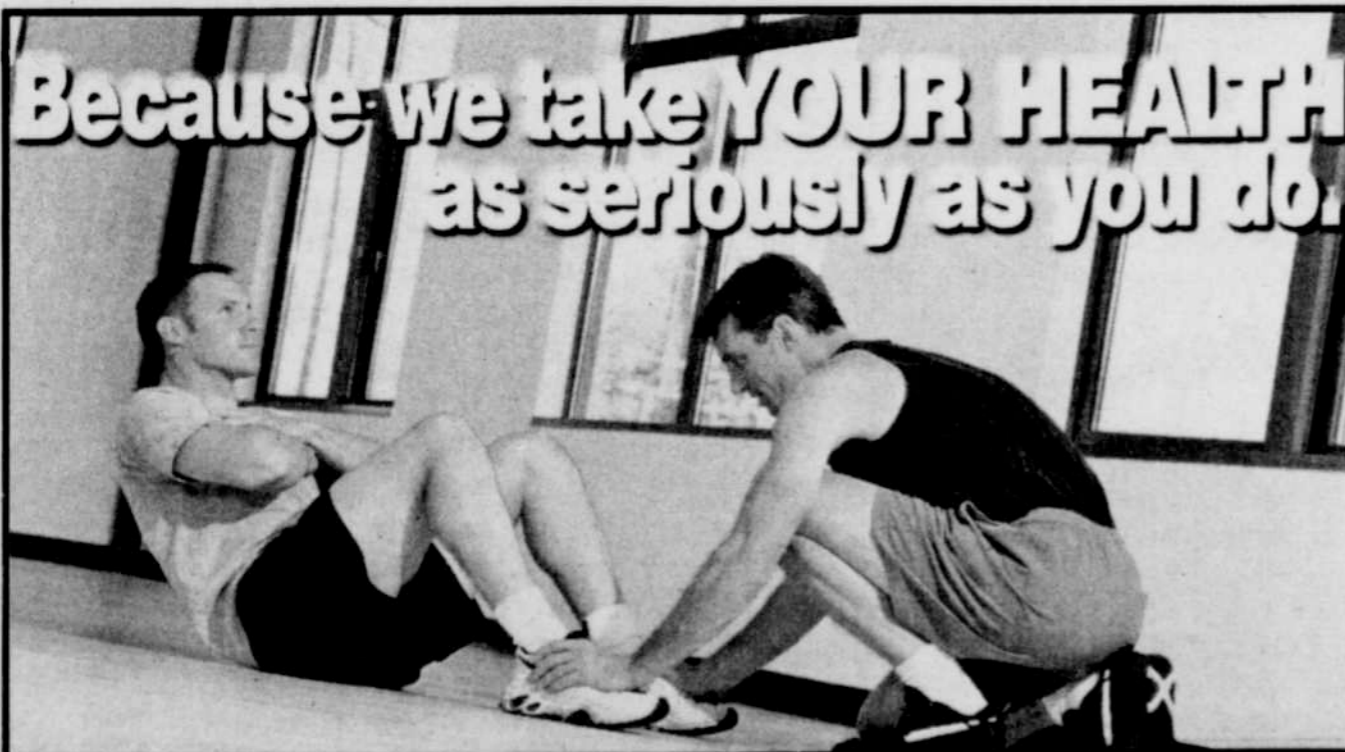
And there's always someone to run with for every level. For all those who started running marathons at 15 or who want to keep beating their personal bests, there is someone who won't run faster than she can carry on a conversation or who is more interested in what's on the breakfast menu at Compass Cafe. **J**

PORTLAND FRONTRUNNERS head out every Tuesday evening and every Saturday and Sunday morning. Contact them at 503-239-7705 or visit www.portlandfrontrunners.org. The international site is www.frontrunners.org.

MELISSA SAYLER is the Production Assistant and go-to sports writer at Just Out.



Normally they take their running very seriously—we swear



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