

## The rise of the Urban Runner

What is your motivation for running/walking? Most will say to keep fit or to lose weight. But there is so much more. A sense of achievement (battling with yourself and your PBs). Running faster. Running longer. Belonging to a group of people that all understand why you are running around a track on a cold/wet winters evening. Being bitten by the running bug. It's hard to pinpoint when it starts but your life will revolve around your next run – planning routes, dry kit, clean kit, is my Garmin charged and so on.....

If you are reading this, then you are part of Urban Runner (UR). But what exactly is UR and how was it formed? Firstly, UR is not a club and I don't want it to become a club. Clubs have politics and committee's which I don't like. They distract us from running. So, using the simple parkrun model, it is a platform for people to get together and run – no fuss/no drama. The only difference being a more structured approach to your progression. It is a community-based group open to all that have supported me in the past or have a similar mindset. As you know, with COVID-19 restrictions I have closed the group to new members. We need to take steps to remain safe and avoid spreading the virus.

I have been running on and off for +30 years. I hated running in my school days. To be honest I wasn't very fit or sporty at all. A top-class nerd hanging around with other nerds. That's how we rolled back in the days. I suffered from asthma which was often used as an excuse to limit my physical activity. I kind of got into running in the late 80's (before some of you were even born). It consisted of a 3-mile loop during my work lunch break (2-3 times a week). I was introduced to parkrun in 2012 and that's when I became serious. You can't help but become competitive, wanting to do better each week. A lot of my closest friends were met at parkrun. Such a mixture of people each with different backgrounds but all sharing the same passion.

Roughly 2014 I joined my first running club. It seemed like the natural progression to improve my running. And for the first couple of years it did help. There were lots of runs which you could take part in and there were lots of great runners. This is when I first got involved in track. I noticed that the individual sessions were great, but there was no link/consistency between each session. Surely there should be a more systematic approach? Being a bit of a control freak I initially started taking the track warm ups and cool downs. I had been going to yoga for over 10 years and used my stretching knowledge in the sessions. In a very short period, I was organising/taking the entire session, with sessions being linked to one another and having a focus. I got my Leader in Running Fitness (LiRF) qualification to back up my knowledge. As with anything you do, you will fall in and out of love with it. In 2018 I had totally lost my running mojo. This was a combination of being bored, lack of progression and club politics sucking the sole out of running. I had a difference of opinion on key track related issues and decided I needed to take a break from club running. You quickly realise who your real friends are in the club and who just used you for your knowledge, with only a handful keeping in contact.

In 2019 I joined my second running club to get my running back on track. I vowed to myself that I wouldn't get involved in the organisation of any club events or give up my time. It was nice to street run in a group. Being an average runner in a big club you will fade into the background. I was happy with that, just going out to run. The runs were hard, and I forgot how long 10K could be. I learnt new local routes. It was nice to just run and not worry about anything else. Then in the beginning of 2019 I was approached to take on track. Initially I declined but then agreed to do it for a trial period of 3 months which turned out to be a year. I quickly demonstrated what could be achieved on track with the right approach and numbers swelled during summer and kept high throughout winter.

Things were going well until spring this year when COVID-19 surprised us with an extended visit. New challenges meant a new approach to training. Zoom stretching sessions were introduced to my friends as a way of keeping a bond and being a part of a group. This was an extension of my parkrun stretch sessions. One of the Zoom sessions developed into what is known as Faux Trax. The sessions ended up in Clayhall Park with 3 hubs to suit runners. Over summer (lockdown), stretching in the park was introduced and I hope to bring that back in Spring 2021.

Things happen for a reason. You may not understand them at the time, but life has away of sorting itself out. I got my Coaching in Running Fitness (CiRF) qualification. What I noticed with running clubs in general is the emphasis is put on racing but there is very little education on injury prevention. Not everyone wants to race. Then there is the stigma that you must be fast to attend a track session. This deters so many runners.

Different coaches from different clubs have different approaches to track running. For me I have 3 very simple rules:

1. It should be accessible to all regardless of ability – from walkers, injured runners doing rehab to the speed merchants. You shouldn't feel intimidated to come to track.
2. It should be fun – if it's fun you will want to come back. If you don't like it then you will not have the motivation to attend. Or if you do you will not give 100%.
3. No club politics....

This was the gap in the market I filled with UR. Clearly it is a big gap as UR has literally been an overnight success. Where will it be in 6 months' time? Who knows?

What is my one regret? I understand everyone has busy lives, but it really saddens me when most people overlook basic conditioning and flexibility/mobility, but just focus on running. Then, they are surprised that they have an injury. I offer 3 stretching classes over the week. They are free and will help you stay nimble. I would very much like to see the same energy for stretching as we see for track attendance. But this is proving to be challenging. I really appreciate the regular attendees and I hope you are seeing the benefits. I too have other things I could be doing but realise the importance of regular stretching. For those who have not tried a class I would urge you to give it a go.

Finally, if you have any ideas that you would like UR to get involved then please do let me know. The Movember challenge is a great example. Combined with lockdown and Faux Trax it is proving to be very popular.

Thanks

Coach Rak.