

The Most Impressive Marathon Runners in Los Angeles are Under 18



By **Matthew Futterman**
Sportswriter

The Los Angeles Marathon is often overshadowed by the world's larger and more storied marathons.

That may be especially true this year, when the race takes place on Nov. 7, the same day as the New York City Marathon, having been postponed from March because of the pandemic.

But the Los Angeles race, which travels from Dodger Stadium to Century City, has accomplished something that the major marathons have never attempted.

Over the past three decades more than 50,000 middle and high school students, most of them from underserved schools and communities, have trained for and completed the race as part of the organization Students Run L.A.



Lupe Conde, a freshman at Santa Monica College, will run her fourth Los Angeles Marathon this November as part of a program called Students Run L.A. Allison Zaucha for The New York Times

Their accomplishment is remarkable in itself. And their participation could help answer two questions that educators, coaches and doctors have long pondered: Can teenage bodies



A Students Run L.A. practice session this month at South Gate Park near Los Angeles. Allison Zaucha for The New York Times

handle the load of long-distance running, and, if so, can distance running improve academic performance?

Anecdotal evidence to support the relationship between running and academics is easy to find around the Los Angeles Marathon. Consider Lupe Conde, a recent graduate of Aspire Ollin University Preparatory Academy in Huntington Park, Calif., who will be running in her fourth Los Angeles Marathon this year.

Conde said she got into marathon running after seeing older girls in the school with marathon medals. She wanted one. So in ninth grade she joined the dozen or so students who train each year with a teacher in the school.

It took her eight hours to complete that first marathon. She said she would never do it again. But the race was too hard to resist.

"I used running as a way to cope and keep me going not just physically but also mentally," Conde, 18, said in a recent interview. "With all the work, and the A.P. classes, I used it to help with my mental health. It taught me grit and perseverance."

Then there is Assael Mendez, a high school soccer player who graduated from Lawndale High School earlier this year. He said attending U.C.L.A. had always been his dream,



Middle school students take a break while training for the marathon at South Gate Park. Allison Zaucha for The New York Times

but he started to doubt himself as he grinded through his sophomore and junior years at Lawndale.

That changed as Mendez, now 18, trained for the marathon for the first time during his junior year. When he wanted to stop on his long training runs, he would ask himself why he thought he could get to U.C.L.A. and succeed there if he couldn't keep running.

"I would go home and I would think, 'If I can run 13 miles, then I can finish this homework,'" he said.

Mendez is now in his freshman year at U.C.L.A.

Students Run L.A. has been tracking the academic achievements of its participants for nearly 20 years. In 2019, the last normal school year before the pandemic, 99 percent of the seniors who participated were on track to graduate from high school, and nearly all of them planned to attend college. (That same year, officials with the Los Angeles Unified School District reported that 78 percent of its seniors were on track for graduation.)

Of course, there is a degree of self-selection at play here. It's not a great leap to say that a student who signs up to train for and run a marathon is probably the kind of goal-oriented person who may be more likely than the average student to meet the requirements for high school graduation.

"It's a combination of who the kids are and the training they do," said Ben Bravo, a special-education teacher in nearby Carson, Calif. "You finish a marathon, something such a small percentage of people do on any weekend, and you know you can accomplish anything you set your mind to."

That said, marathoning has not traditionally been recommended for teenagers. Conventional wisdom has held that since teenage physiques are still developing, they are not ready to endure the wear and tear of marathon training.

Five years ago, organizers with Students Run L.A. asked Dr. Joshua Goldman, a sports medicine physician at U.C.L.A., to work with them. Goldman told the group that its mission was at odds with medical advice. Organizers suggested that the advice was wrong. So Goldman asked if he could study what is arguably the world's largest cohort of teenage marathoners.

Last year, Goldman and his team of researchers published their results. They found that teenage marathoners had an injury rate that was lower than the rate for adults, and that middle school marathoners had a lower rate of injury than high schoolers.

"Our theory is that when you are 13 years old and something hurts, you slow down or stop, but 17-year-olds push through," Goldman said.

He said training programs like Students Run L.A.'s, which slowly adds mileage over seven months, are the key to preventing injuries. Students usually run races of 3.1, 6.2 and 13.1 miles and complete long training runs before taking on the marathon distance of 26.2 miles.

The study led an expert panel for sports medicine to issue a new consensus statement on teenage marathoning last year. The group essentially opposed setting any limits on teen runners so long as they are supervised.

"If you can encourage a kid to get moving and provide a structure for that kid to grow and develop, then it is very understandable to let them run different events," said Dr. Brian Krabak, a sports medicine physician at the University of Washington who wrote the new statement.

"It's important to provide that structure, but that's true for adults, too."

Organizers expect 70 student runners at this year's race, smaller than the usual contingent. Both school classes and the training program were held remotely last year, the marathon was delayed, and most students completed a virtual event.

But next year is already looking neon bright. There's a contingent of 2,700 runners with Students Run L.A. who are training for 2022.



Coach Alfredo Chavez handing out a Students Run L.A. shirt. Allison Zaucha for The New York Times