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C U L T U R E

Kids Going Long—On the Road and in School

Since 1989, Students Run LA has quietly coached 70,000 high-risk young runners to a finish the LA Marathon and reach academic success.

Sarah Barker

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Harry Shabazian was a teacher at a continuation high school in East Los Angeles. Continuation schools, for those unfamiliar, are for kids who are struggling academically, socially, legally, in every way there is to struggle. They were circling the drain. Young and high on idealism as he was, Shabazian still had trouble designing a lesson plan that would allow his students to succeed at anything. Or one that would matter, given that a fair number would not live to see their 18th birthday.

Then Shabazian ran the first LA Marathon—1986. It was life changing. His students asked him about it and he suggested they do it with him the next year. “But we have to train,” he said. Critical words there were “we” and “train.”

In 1987, Shabazian and a handful of his students completed the LA Marathon. Then, they completed high school. The following year, two other continuation high school teachers, Eric Spears and Paul Trapani, joined Shabazian with some of their students. This was all unofficial—the teachers trained with the kids after school on their own dime; they got the students shoes, they held car washes to raise money. The kids lied about their age because the LA Marathon had a lower limit of 18. It was fine. They just did it. And it changed their lives. They went on to college or jobs. They succeeded.

After the 1989 LA Marathon, this unofficial enterprise came to the attention of the head of the LA school board.

“You’re a runner,” she said to her deputy, Marsha Charney. “Let’s bring these guys in and make this a district-wide program.”



Photo: Courtesy Students Run LA

The Marathon as a Classroom

Since 1989, some 70,000 LA public school kids in grades 7 through 12 have completed the [LA Marathon](#) through the now-separate nonprofit [Students Run LA](#). The full 26.2 miles. The marathon has a lower age limit of 16 but makes an exception for SRLA participants as young as 12.

That bears repeating—70,000 teens have completed the marathon over the program's 31 years. This is astounding, not least because SRLA is not a running program—it's a drop-out prevention program. It's about doing really difficult things by making a plan and sticking to it. SRLA teaches kids how to be successful, using the marathon as the classroom.

Kids run marathons all the time—just not in large numbers. For example, about 20 kids a year under age 18 run the Twin Cities Marathon. Opinion is mixed, but the fact that some marathons, particularly mega-marathons like NYC, have a 16- or 18-year-old minimum lends credence to the idea that marathons are somehow harmful to under-18s. In fact, age limits may be a convenient way to avoid the added work of accommodating minors.

That thousands of kids age 12 to 18 have trained for and completed the marathon every year for 31 years, without serious injury, with the full support of the LA Marathon and the LA Unified School District—well, that calls for looking into. Maybe the running community can learn something from a non-running organization.



Photo: Courtesy Students Run LA

The Program

First and foremost, SRLA is free to students. They start in September, running after school and usually one weekend day with a volunteer leader (almost all are teachers). SRLA organizes progressively longer races each month—a 5K, 10K, 15K, two half marathons, and a 30K—building to the early March marathon. Entry fee and transportation to all races is provided by SRLA.

Some drop out of the program but by December, after they've completed the 15K race, they're usually committed. That's when they get a pair of shoes (Nike donates them). Those lining up for the marathon get a race uniform and a hoodie, and they're bussed back to Santa Monica High School for a catered post-race party.

Of course, nothing is free. From the beginning, SRLA has been generously funded (Shell Oil was one of the first donors), which in turn, is due to the tireless hustle of their five-person staff. But time really is money. Marsha Charney, co-founder and executive director of SRLA, credits the donated hours of volunteer leaders, many of who have led groups of students for more than 10 years, with SRLA's success.

"The secret to the program from the beginning was that leaders ran with them," says Charney. "Like Harry said, 'It's really hard, and I'm going to do it with you.' Most of these kids, nobody's there with them consistently. It's unbelievable that leaders are willing to volunteer all these hours. Why do they do it? Maybe the satisfaction of seeing kids they never thought would go to college, go to college. The kids understand that sacrifice [by the leaders]—they'll do anything for them."

SRLA leaders have a ton of latitude, and responsibility. They're provided training and a handbook that includes a conservative marathon training schedule designed for completion, but how closely they stick to that plan, when they run, where they run, dealing with injuries and a variety of abilities—that's all up to the individual leader. They also have paperwork—parent signatures, a physical for each runner, a roster, and weekly mileage and injury reports.

SRLA works with 185 public schools, mostly those with significant numbers of at-risk students. At one point in the late 1990s, 5,000 kids started SRLA in September. For manageability, it's now capped at 3,200, with more than 20 schools on the waiting list. "We haven't recruited for this program for the last 25 years; schools come to us," Charney says.

At the outset, she had significant doubt about being able to raise money for a program in which kids as young as 12 (SRLA started with high schools and added middle schools in 1997) ran many times more mileage than any existing youth sports program.

"What we knew was there was a huge gang problem in the inner city," Charney says. "If anyone questioned kids

running a marathon, well, they were either running with us or they were getting shot on a street corner. From the beginning, 99% of the kids who started the marathon finished. The same percent graduate, and over 95% have plans to go to college. Those statistics spoke pretty loudly.”

On the other hand, she never doubted that large numbers of kids could knock off 26.2 miles, and would want to. “For one, there’s so little they can do for free that’s safe. How many can be on a baseball team or soccer? If they’re unsure of their athletic ability, they can try this for free. Most of the groups have 20 or 30 kids which is a built-in support system. It’s not about running, it’s about belonging. And finally, for some reason, no one challenges the kids that run. These are tough schools, but there’s an aura about the SRLA group—they’re doing something nobody else is doing.”

In 31 years, SRLA has received very little criticism or pushback from any quarter. Every year, they get one or two complaints from parents whose kids were dropped from the program for not showing up to practice or a race. That’s about it. Charney said they get lots of praise for the students’ polite and supportive attitude from other runners.



Photo: Courtesy Students Run LA

The Student

On Sunday, 15-year-old Isabela Gomez will line up for her second LA Marathon. Her friend had joined SRLA as an eighth grader, and gushed about the experience. So, as a freshman at Harbor Teacher Prep, Gomez signed up. Her longest run going into it was two miles.

“You think you’ll never be able to do it, but within the first three months you’re running nine miles,” Gomez says. “We talk and keep each other motivated. We’re all feeling the same pain, the same fatigue. I wouldn’t be able to run all these miles without my teammates.”

As a newbie 14-year-old, Gomez finished her first marathon in 6:32. And was stoked to try it again this year. She runs after school three days a week with the SRLA group, 4 to 5 miles, plus a long run on the weekend, so she doesn’t participate in other sports. The Saturday long run started at 7 miles and peaked a couple weeks ago at 25 miles. Gomez, like her teammates, has had sore knees and shin splints. Nothing serious. She was prescribed some strengthening exercises, and that seemed to solve the problem.

Gomez is a cerebral sort, well suited to long-distance running. “It really is hard, more mentally than physically. But it sort of has to be that hard. I don’t think you can just run a 5K and have the same experience. For sure, it has changed me academically. In math, I’m struggling—I’m not for the STEM field. I think to myself, I ran a marathon—I can find out what X is.”

Though she's only 15, she knows in a very real sense what it feels like to run 26.2 miles. And she's not afraid to go there again. "I thought the 18-mile race this year might be worse than last year, but it wasn't. Knowing what was going on helped me pace myself. Ignorance is not bliss."

Not surprisingly, Gomez has always planned to go to college. SRLA has only sharpened her determination.



Photo: Courtesy Students Run LA

The Science

Most marathons base their minimum age limit, if there is one, on a 2002 physicians' statement—an educated opinion. The main concern is that training for and running a marathon puts too much load on a developing musculoskeletal system. There's little hard data, because to prove there's no risk you'd need to have a ton of kids under 18 run marathons and see what happens to their bones and cartilage 20, 30, 40 years down the road. A controlled study like this would be prohibitively expensive and difficult.

In 2015, SRLA contacted Dr. Joshua Goldman, assistant professor of Family Medicine and Orthopaedics at UCLA, and associate director of the university's Orthopaedic Institute for Children, to try to get a better handle on injury risk. Prior to 2015, they'd never had a medical advisor, nor had they had any serious injury.

"When I met with SRLA in 2015, I quoted the guidelines that say kids under 18 shouldn't run marathons," Goldman says. "Their reply was, this is an inner city community. Very few of these kids are graduating high school, most are in gangs, and many die before the age of 18. Long-term cartilage and bone health doesn't matter if they don't live to 18. I said, 'All right, I'm in.' In this instance, it was an easy decision."

But his work with the general population has led Goldman to the same conclusion—the risks associated with kids running marathons is low and the benefits high. "There is data that says people who exercise at a young age are likely to continue to exercise and lead healthier lives, have [lower rates of] cardiovascular disease, do better in school, and go to college," Goldman says. "No sport is without risk. We know about the risk of brain trauma with football. We wonder if kids should run marathons, and yet we condone a contact sport with this absurd injury rate? That's crazy. Overall, the health benefits are pro marathon."

In the fourth year of data collection, Goldman found, compared to adults, kids have a much higher marathon completion rate—99% of the SRLA kids who start the marathon finish it. He found an injury rate of 18% with SRLA—that was lower than expected. The injury rate for adults training over a 12-week period was 20% to 60%. SRLA participants follow an 18-week training program; adults usually train for a shorter period of time and are less likely to stick with a plan.

“During training and the marathon, kids generally do better than adults,” Goldman says.

Goldman found the same sorts of injuries in adults and teens—issues with knees, lower legs, ankles and feet. Accordingly, he tweaked SRLA’s program to include strength training and cross training, and “smoothed out” the mileage. He hopes to expand video movement analysis of individual runners to help prevent injuries.

Short term, Goldman says the way SRLA approaches the marathon—completion rather than competition—seems safe. Long-term effects are currently being studied by a friend of Goldman’s, Dr. William Roberts at the University of Minnesota (Roberts is [seeking participants](#)).

Research has already shown that endurance running by teens doesn’t affect stature—young runners tend to hit their growth spurt later, but still reach their expected height. It’s also known that many popular sports—hockey and gymnastics among them—can cause growth plate problems. “We just try to manage it,” Goldman says.

For the size, impact and long history of SRLA, the program is surprisingly unknown and uncopied. [Students Run Philly Style](#) is a smaller scale iteration of SRLA, as is [DreamFar](#) in Boston. [Running for a Better Oakland](#) is a similar mentorship program with the goal of a half marathon.

Goldman pointed to healthy funding—particularly from youth sports and public education group [LA84 Foundation](#)—and sunny SoCal weather that accommodates year round training as to why SRLA is, counterintuitively, both successful and unique.

SRLA’s under-the-radar reality is anything but purposeful, Marsha Charney says. They received a grant to develop a toolkit—a step-by-step recipe for SRLA—in the early 2000s. Toolkits were disseminated to 200 school districts across the US. “Honestly, it’s hard to do what we did,” Charney says. “Maybe we got lucky with this critical mass of teachers who were willing to donate their time and try it.”

While experts natter about whether kids can run marathons, on Sunday, about 2,900 well-prepared SRLA participants will line up near Dodger’s Stadium, and nearly all of them will finish in Santa Monica. They’ll be tired. But fine. They’ll be fine.

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