

Ready to Race?

by Diet Detective Editorial Staff

For most runners who race, getting to the finish line is all the fun, no matter who's in front or behind. Here's how to get in on the action.

Running is a sport with few rules. You don't have to win races or even enter them to call yourself a runner. But entering and completing a race is a great goal to set for yourself. It keeps you motivated, it gives you a chance to play instead of practice, and it's a whole lot of fun.

If you're afraid of getting in over your head, remember this: Of all the people entering and running races around the world, very few of them expect to finish anywhere near the top. For most of the runners, winning is like an Abbott and Costello routine: "Who's in first, what's in second, I don't know....third place." Most entrants are competing only against the clock, if they're competing at all. Plenty of them walk the whole way (and probably have more fun than the ones doing the whole thing at 5- and 6-minute miles). If all you care about is finishing and having fun-and in your first few races, that's all you should care about-consider yourself ready as long as you can cover the distance.

"You can always alternate walking and running if you need to," says Mindy Solkin, owner of The Running Center in New York. "If you're doing your first 5K, you don't need to really race it. It's really just to accomplish the distance in a race-like setting, cross the finish line and get closure to what you trained for. It's more of a mental thing."

The 5K (five kilometers, or 3.1 miles) is a great way to make your racing debut. If you can run three miles, you can do a 5K. And because it's the most popular race distance in America, chances are good there's one near you practically year-round. To find a race, check with your local running-specialty store. They usually have a pretty good handle on the local running scene. Barring that, look for a running columnist in your newspaper's sports section or check the bulletin board at your gym.

When you find a race, get an entry form, fill it out and send it in. Most races charge an entry fee to cover production costs such as race numbers, water tables, T-shirts (every finisher gets one) and other goodies. The fee is usually lower if you register in advance, and some running clubs even let you register online.

When it's time to line up for the start, you may find a few butterflies in your stomach. That's not at all unusual, but when you think about it, what do you have to be nervous about? What's the worst that could happen? Just have fun, enjoy the run and revel in your accomplishment. Think of the race as your usual training run-with a few hundred friends joining you. "Don't worry about going faster," says Solkin. "Save that for races down the road."