



Mark Cucuzzella, MD *Far from “broken”—and far from breaking—a competitive runner teaches a community joy*

By Jeff Venables

Born in 1966 and raised in Ellicott City, Maryland, a suburb of the Baltimore-Washington Metropolitan Area, family practice physician Mark Cucuzzella, MD, FAAFP, attended Loyola High School where he excelled in track and cross-country. His interest in medicine started there. “I was hurt all the time running,” he says, “so I started to digest sports medicine to figure out my own body and why it kept getting injured.”

Mark attended the University of Virginia, where as a track and cross-country runner he found the same injury issues from high school affecting him and his undergraduate team. “In those days you beat yourself up every day and whoever comes out on the other end alive is still in the game,” he says. The innovative team physician Dr. Daniel Kulund at UVA wound up not only treating Mark regularly, but mentoring him at his clinic in nearby Charlottesville.

“I became a patient and was fascinated by his approach. Initially [sports physicians] just treated symptoms. He was looking for causes of injuries,” Mark recalls. The approach combined the search for underlying causes—by, say, performing kinetic chain assessments—with then-cutting-edge

therapies like deep water running. Mark wanted to follow this path, and indeed went on to attend The University of Virginia School of Medicine in Charlottesville on a military scholarship.

After a residency at Travis Air Force Base in California, followed by nine years’ active duty in Portugal and the Air Force Academy, then a five-year stint at the University of Colorado, Dr. Cucuzzella presently finds himself a professor at the West Virginia University School of Medicine and clinically specializing in family medicine and pediatric obesity prevention in his full-time practice.

A race becomes a series, providing trails for kids

Clinical practice—seeing patients and teaching residents at Jefferson Memorial Hospital—accounts for about 70 percent of Mark’s routine. Yet he is equally passionate about carrying on the legacy of understanding underlying causes, which has led him to embrace community action to fight sedentarism throughout Jefferson County. The idea is to help local communities become runners, if not necessarily racers, though he himself still throws down impressively good times when he runs, routinely clocking in at sub-2:40 at the Boston Marathon.

Above all, he wants to see these budding West Virginia runners avoid becoming patients. And so the other 30 percent of Mark’s professional time these days involves grant work; he has undertaken a hugely successful effort to bring trails to elementary schools throughout Jefferson County, and part of that adventure has led to his founding of a race



Mark participating in the Run Through History 10k held at the Antietam National Battlefield in Sharpsburg, Maryland, on June 3, 2012.

“This all needs to be fun in your day. If it’s not, it’s not going to work. It’s not about any outcome. It’s about getting out there and relaxing and enjoying what you’re doing. I think if you figure that out, your chances of success are better. If you can’t figure out how to make it fun, relaxing, and efficient, you’re just going to break.” – Mark Cucuzzella on marathoning

known as Freedom’s Run. The wildly successful event has now expanded into a whole series, with a spring counterpart to fall’s annual quintet of races: a free kids’ miler, 5K, 10K, half-marathon, and marathon (www.freedomrun.org).

How does Mark’s team help see these elementary school trails get built? “We help them with the process,” he explains. “We direct them to who to contract and where to get the materials. We find foundations with matching grants.” Freedom’s Run is integral: it celebrated its Fourth Annual event on October 13 with Mark again at the helm as director. As the largest race in West Virginia, its revenues significantly help provide matching funds to attract

financial support for trail building from local businesses and from the schools themselves.

To help fight childhood obesity, families must become and remain engaged in their children's wellness, and Dr. Cucuzzella sees that as partially attainable by engaging the wider community. Enter the trail-building initiatives, which he began about five years ago. The Freedom's Run event series provides community awareness of running and fitness, as well as attracts tourism and therefore more matching-fund revenue for trail building, which provides community awareness of running and fitness. In this way, everything is interlocked in support of the community-wellness goal.

But for sub-2:40 finisher Cucuzzella, maybe a bit surprisingly, competitive racing isn't the point: "I use the word 'race' softly," he says. "But we're in a little town that lives or dies by tourism." Last year, 3,000 people from 43 states participated in the fall Freedom's Run events. "Few locals want to run a full marathon over the rolling hills of West Virginia," he says. "And I don't want them to." By which he means, of course, that racing the marathon attracts the tourism dollars his trail-building initiatives need, but it is not exactly his goal for *this* community, situated as it is in the third most obese state in the U.S. (Mississippi ranks number one, followed by Louisiana, according to an August 2012 report by the CDC). "Start with setting a goal of finishing a shorter event and enjoying the process," he says.

Running ought to be natural

Dr. Cucuzzella's education site, <http://naturalrunningcenter.com>, is another facet of his community approach, in that it focuses on spreading reliable information about healthy running form. This is one of his key interests, in particular the minimalist shoe movement, and all that we know and have yet to learn about such running. Mark opened the first minimalist shoe store in the country, Two Rivers Treads, selling no shoes with elevated heels. His community became a testing ground where the goal was teaching form and healthier running principles.

On the Natural Running Center site and at Two Rivers Treads (www.tworivertreads.com), everyone—from patients and principals to colleagues and consumers—can find the latest in evidence-based research relating to the minimalist shoe movement. Shoe stores, not least of all, can find the data they need to better serve their customers' needs and answer their questions.

"On the running retail side, the believers in minimalism weren't physicians and physical therapists," Mark says. "We wanted to be able to support these folks by saying, 'Here's a whole panel of medical people who are of that opinion.' Our site supports them with education." Mark tells the retailers to email him if a customer has questions. Alternately, the store can



As the race director of Freedom's Run, Mark welcomes young runners for their first 5K on October 13, 2012. Freedom's Run is comprised of five events and is the largest race in West Virginia.

point a customer to content on the site so the retailer doesn't have to try and answer beyond their scope of knowledge.

This is community thinking, and its purpose is to disseminate information responsibly. Mark explains that through the site he and his colleagues are able and willing to say, "This is what we know, this is what we think, and this is where we have no clue." We're not making claims that this is going to prevent every injury."

For Mark, the site was the logical outgrowth of a need for clarity in what may have once had the reputation of, but certainly is no longer, simply a craze. Mark says, "Being up in an elevated heel has no place in modern running and walking. The evidence doesn't bear out that new runners going into flat shoes versus traditional elevated shoes increases injury risk." The distinction between neutral (flat) and minimalist ("barefoot") is important here. "We teach them gradual adaptation. The foot should be in a flat position," he says. "Now, if you're 20 years' weak, we need to help you progress slowly to get back to there. But we are not designed to need all this support."

He cites the smooth, springy running of our youth: "When we're kids, we have this highly functioning, spring-kinetic mechanism. We jump and bound all the time. Then, we brace the foot, and we lose the mechanism." A braced foot leads to a restricted spring mechanism, and as a result it gets weaker. So perhaps a clinician adds a motion control shoe to support it, later graduating to orthotics, and the mechanism gets ever weaker. "So if you're going to go backwards, you have to meet that person where they are," Mark says. In April he co-wrote a piece in *Running Times* that asks, "Are You Ready to Go Minimal?" As Mark explains, "Are you ready? is the question. If not, here's how you get ready."

Seeking wellness, not PRs

Dr. Cucuzzella's philosophy might be summed up as: To run healthily, there must be joy. His two children, Leo, 9, and Lily, 7, both did their first 5K at this October's Freedom's Run. His wife, Roberta DeBiasi, whom he married in 1991 after meeting at UVA medical school, runs Freedom's Run every year. She is currently a physician at Children's National Medical Center. The relaxed joy this medical family feels running together is reminiscent of another joyful and relaxed medical family that regularly runs together: AMAA.

Mark sees the semi-annual meetings in Boston and D.C. as an exhilarating chance to be around like-minded colleagues, discuss the latest in a long history of fascinating advances in preventive sports medicine, and run for fun in a weekend of camaraderie. Since 2011 when he first learned of AMAA, he has dived right in. He spoke in April in Boston and just recently at the AMAA symposium held in conjunction with the Marine Corps Marathon. "These people are the leaders in sports medicine and health," he says, and he's delighted to be in the thick of their company.

As a competitive runner, Mark is unique in his relaxed and joyful wellness focus within his sport. And yet that attitude seems to give something back to the competitor within after all. He explains: "This all needs to be play, [to be] fun in your day. If it's not, it's not going to work. A couple times a year if you want to go do something to challenge yourself, by all means do it. But it's not about any outcome. It's about getting out there and relaxing and enjoying what you're doing and doing it comfortably. I think if you figure that out, your chances of success are better. If you have a goal like qualifying for the Boston Marathon or something similar,

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or electronic) for free to any school or group that commits to train and run the mile.

If you are interested in participating, please contact Dave Watt at miler@americanrunning.org or dave@americanrunning.org or call 800-776-2732, ext 13. Training plans are available now for groups looking to get started in February 2013. To view the event's website, go to www.runamile.org.

Boys and Girls Meet Again on the Cross Country Battlefield

The 7th annual Battle of the Potomac Cross Country (XC) Championships took place on November 17 in Gaithersburg, Maryland, pitting the best of West Virginia, Maryland, the District of Columbia, and Virginia in 5K cross country "state vs. state" races. The "XC Border War," as it is nicknamed by the high school runners, is a unique version of cross country. Instead of running for a high school team which consists of seven runners per team, the Battle of the Potomac puts all the boys and girls from their home states

on a single team. Pride then becomes the driving force as the states race each other to determine who is the best along the Potomac River.

This year's event drew its largest race field with over 525 boys and girls. The signature races that determine the winners of the two "Potomac XC Cups" pit the fastest boys and girls from either side of the Potomac River. This year's competition was similar to past years. Unlike standard team scoring of seven runners per team with the top five scoring, the XC Border War event scores the top 10 finishers for each team or state. The Virginia girls kept their unbeaten streak alive and defeated the Maryland girls by nearly 40 points. Maryland's boys kept the Potomac XC Cup on the north side of the Potomac River.

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and if you can't figure out how to make it fun, relaxing, and efficient, you're just going to break."

This relaxed-efficient approach has led Dr. Cucuzzella down still other interesting paths. Serving as a doctor in the Air Force reserves, Mark recently completed a project to help improve running mechanics in service members. The recurring fitness assessments these women and men undergo involve about 60 percent running—so poor performance can seriously affect your score, *and* put your job at risk.

Mark says, "There is a proper way to prepare yourself. Your goal is to be well every day, where every day of the week you could wake up and pass your fitness test." To combat rising failure rates, the Air Force called upon Mark and several colleagues to create an interactive web site called the Efficiency Running Program that provides instruction and exercises internally to the Air Force. The site went live just last month, another community serviced.

Transforming communities

"Our goal is to transform the community," says Mark. "Health is different than disease. If we just got everyone healthy, we wouldn't need all this care." As pioneers in establishing concepts such as *disuse syndrome*, Mark sees and appreciates that AMAA members have always understood that. "What I'm doing just piggybacks on what all AMAA members have done," he says.

His outcomes are certainly real. For every trail his team has built so far—there are four in Jefferson County, ranging from 400 meters to a mile—each elementary school has started a running club. Some schools have even created "trail time" as a class period within the school day. All of this reminds one of the old *Field of Dreams* adage, "If you build it, they will come." The trails are also open to the community at day's end for non-competitive use. Local runners are grateful, as there is a lack of safe roads and green spaces within Jefferson County; still, it's surely the sight of up to 150 children staying after school to run together that must make this community feel they've been gifted something extraordinary.

Mark's team also built a garden along with one of the trails, and hopes to repeat this pairing of natural food and running, because, as he says, "Ideally you also want people to start to learn where food comes from."

Mark knows better than anybody that educating the public notwithstanding, all of this is far from just academic. It is currently reported by the CDC that 32.4 percent of West Virginia's population is obese. But, as he cheerfully points out, this means "there's no place we can go but up, pretty much." And with Dr. Cucuzzella literally leading the pack, that hill will hopefully be easy to keep on climbing.

Jeff Venables is the editor of Running & FitNews® and a regular contributor to the AMAA Journal.

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