Why run a Marathon?
The first obvious question is “Why would I challenge myself to run 26.2 miles; a feat that would probably take more than four hours of continuous running to achieve?” Running a marathon is something I have never ever been close to attempting let alone achieving. There are two main reasons that caused me to attempt this challenge; high cholesterol and my kids. I found out that I have high cholesterol about six years ago; I was 32 years old at the time. It was a bit of a shock because I had always considered myself physically fit and active. In my foolish pride I believed that with small adjustments I could control the high cholesterol. Six years later my cholesterol was even higher and at my last physical exam my doctor warned me that I would be prescribed medications if I was not able to lower it. I’m now approaching 40 and without dramatic improvements I was setting myself up for very serious heart conditions at a relatively young age.

...I have high cholesterol...

The other reason for me to try something big was my family. I have two young kids and I realized that I was always too tired to be active with them. Having a schedule of working until dinner time every weekday, having a lot of responsibility on the weekends, and without any regular exercise was leaving me with no energy for them or myself. I decided that I did not want to be that dad that always said “no” to play time because I was “too tired.” I had to try something new.

One Fateful day
By chance, one Saturday last April, we drove by a wellness expo being held in a shopping center. There I met Rudy Acevedo of R+R Fitness. He gave me some information about a training program they had which prepared people to run the San Antonio Rock & Roll Marathon. The program was six months long and accepted people at any running fitness level and prepared you for the half or full marathon. Although, I had not been running regularly for over 12 years and having never run a half or full marathon, somewhere deep within I felt that I should not only sign up but that I should sign up for the full marathon. By nature I’m very competitive and I thought that if I was going to do this I was going to do it all the way. So, in my mind the goal was set; “couch to marathon in six months”. (Please note: I have zero qualifications as a doctor or even as a personal trainer so please consult with your doctor before training for a competitive race.)

My first lesson was realized
In order to achieve something that requires months of training you need to make yourself accountable to others and join or follow a structured program. I decided to join the running group. The running group was awesome. I never would have reached my goal without the support of the running group. The running program provided us with a schedule to keep during the week, certified coaching staff, guest speakers, training tips, and running sessions on Saturday’s with the group. Saturday morning runs were critical because these were sessions where the mileage was increased in order to get us to our goal.
R+R Fitness coordinated the Saturday runs by marking out the distance and providing water stops. Every week by sticking to the program I was achieving my goal. The very first Saturday was pretty difficult. The assumption is that if you were training for the full marathon you were already able to run some miles. Well… I had to run four miles on my first Saturday run. Let’s just say I had to run a little then walk a little in order to finish. It was tough but I wasn’t ready to give up. During the week I now had to wake up an hour or two earlier several days a week to get my weekday runs in.

My second major lesson learned
All of this was adding up to a significant change to my lifestyle which was my second major lesson learned. I was getting to bed earlier, I was drinking more water during the day, and I even started to lose some weight. Here was the unexpected result, my positive change in exercise was now affecting other aspects of my life, including diet, sleep, and weight. My running was making me healthier, imagine that.

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The third major lesson realized
I soon realized the value of the advice from others. The first time I ran six miles, I developed major blisters on my feet. One of the coaches pulled up next to me during a run and asked me how I was doing, shared with her my pain and she immediately told me all about “technical running clothing” and why “cotton is your enemy” in long distance running. As soon as I changed my socks, I was able to run a dozen miles without having any blisters. I was soon asking the coaches lots of question and feeling better with each run. After few months I was running a dozen miles without having to walk. I learned about “fuel belts”, “salt tablets”, “energy gels”, “anti-chafe glide”, “running with heart monitor”, “recovery meals”, “yoga for runners”, etc… Wow, I had no idea there was so much to learn about the world of long distance running. Seeking the advice of others not only improved my performance but also encouraged me during that long training program.

My fourth major lesson
The training program was challenging and that brings me to my fourth major lesson; long distance running is as much mental as it is physical. In the beginning, I had blisters, some knee pain, I had to force myself to wake up early enough to run, and I had to continually convince myself that I could run a little further with every long run. With each new pain/obstacle I thought about quitting but I also believed that those would go away if I kept going. Somewhere I had seen some interesting statistics of marathon runners. By large percentages most marathon runners have at least a bachelor’s degree, they on average earn high salaries, and have professional careers. It all started to make sense; people with professional degrees and careers realize that you have to put in a lot of work in order to achieve big goals. You also have to endure some pain and burn through the obstacles to achieve your goals. It was very tempting to stay in bed Saturday mornings especially when I had to wake up at 5:00 am to go run 15 or more miles. For a few moments most Saturday mornings I was arguing with myself trying to convince myself that I deserved a break, that I could run later in the day, or that I didn’t need to train that hard. What a mental battle. The mental aspect was harder in fact than the running. Once I was out of bed and standing with my fellow runners I knew that it was not that hard and more importantly that it was worth it.
My final major lesson
After six long months of training, the marathon had finally arrived and it was the week of the race. Now my final major lesson was about to be learned; training gets you through. On the week of the marathon I picked up some kind of sickness from my beloved kiddos. I started taking antibiotics and was taking it until the day before the marathon. The night before the marathon I made sure that I didn’t have a fever but I still didn’t feel 100%. I convinced myself that if I got a good night’s sleep and was fully hydrated before the race that I would be fine. (Second disclaimer: if you don’t feel well, consult with a doctor before running a race.) Well, that night I was so excited about the race that I probably woke up every hour that night. Nonetheless, my alarm woke me up at 4:30 that morning and I was determined to compete in the race.

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minutes. Then I started to get really tired; I was hitting “the wall.” My legs started to burn a little and it was getting harder and harder to keep the pace. After another half mile I stopped running and started to walk. I would walk for about a minute and then try to jog little more. This went on for about another couple miles. Then one of the coaches from my running group pulled up next to me. She had been with other runners encouraging them before she joined me. Together we ran for a few more miles; she knew it was my first marathon and was encouraging me the whole way. I thought about just walking it in the rest of the way many times but somehow I had the strength to run (er...) shuffle in until the finish. I now realize it was the training that got me through. Had I not put in the training I don’t believe I would have been able to finish as I did. I crossed the finish line with a total time of 5 hours and 25 minutes.

I didn’t set any land speed records but I finished my first marathon. Why stop running marathons?
The question at the beginning was; “why run a marathon?” I think the question has become; “why stop running marathons?”

This journey has had too much positive at this point to stop. I haven’t checked the latest numbers on my cholesterol but just after 3 months of running my total cholesterol dropped from 275 to 215 and by now I have a strong suspicion that it is now in the normal range. I have lots more energy for my kids; I am no longer “too tired” dad. I have lost inches on waist line. I’m eating better, sleeping better, and feeling better. I am definitely hooked and I will be back.

Tony Alarcon

Lessons Learned
1. Be accountable to others
2. Positive changes leads to others
3. Always seek the advice of others
4. Training is also a mental exercise
5. Proper training will get you through...