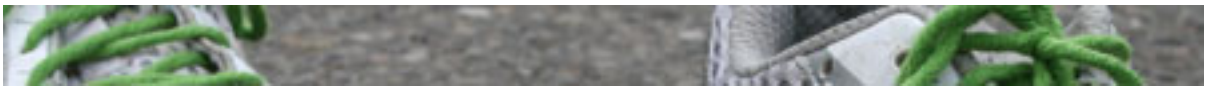

by Lee Ann Dalton

The time: ungodly early. The place: 500 metres past the last chance to hit a portapotty, poised on the Jacques Cartier Bridge in Montréal, Québec. The scene: I'm jumping up and down, wringing my hands and trying to release a cramped calf muscle that has plagued me for the past two weeks. Everyone around me does variations on a theme of the same nervous dance, waiting for the countdown to start.

As I turn to look at the huge digital clock that counts down the seconds until the starting gun goes off, I see a woman who looks oddly familiar, wearing a neckwarmer that is clearly handknit. But before I can ask her, “Didja make that?,” the raucous countdown to the start begins, and we're off on our 42 kilometre-plus journey to the finish line of the Montréal Marathon.

The chances are excellent that my fellow runner *did* knit that neckwarmer. In nearly every race I've entered since I started running three years ago, I've either run with or spotted a fellow knitter. To paraphrase a saying we all grew to hate regarding our beloved craft, running is the new knitting.

Phoca PDF

Susie Hewer knitting her way through the 2007 London marathon.

Photo courtesy Susie Hewer.

Common Ground

At first glance, the two pastimes have seemingly little in common: one requires long hours spent sitting and creating; the other requires constant movement, but nets no tangible creation, and is all about resisting the urge to sit on the curb and cry. (Okay, maybe that was just me in the marathon.) But look closer and you'll see that both running and knitting fall into the back-to-basics mentality that is gaining a foothold in our increasingly techno-driven world.

Think about it. Knitting is a relaxing hobby, and a way to put your personal stamp on your own creation. If you want knitwear that fits, in colors that make you happy, pick up the needles and knit it yourself. There is a satisfaction and pride that comes with the act of creating with sticks and string. Knitting is a pastime that is remarkable in its simplicity, but you can go as crazy as you want

with the complexity of the finished item itself. Some of us are sock knitters, some of us head straight for the lace shawls—the spinners among us go sheep-to-sweater without blinking an eye.

Running stems from a similar do-it-yourself impulse: If you want to be fit, forget all the machines at the gym, lace up a pair of running shoes and just head out the door. Like knitting, running is simple at the core, requiring no more than a decent pair of sneakers and the ability to put one foot in front of the other. There is an equally compelling satisfaction, elated relaxation, and pride that comes from finishing a run, whether it be a short little jaunt around the block, a brisk tempo run, or a killer long run that you never thought you could accomplish, but just did. As with knitting, it's all about the finishing. Simple scarf, complex cabled cardigan—there's an equal sense of accomplishment in finishing either one.

Both pastimes, simple though they can be, come with the requisite "gear." Knitters have their stash of yarn, and runners have their ten-plus pairs of running shoes they just can't bear to get rid of. Cute tech gear is as addictive as that pretty skein of hand-dyed sock yarn, and running groups are just as tightly wound as knitting circles. If there's a technique to be questioned or obstacle to overcome (be it turning heels or healing shin splints) you can bet there's a discussion group or forum devoted to the topic, eagerly followed and commented upon by devotees who swear theirs is the best method to accomplish the goal.

Why do knitters run? For Jenn Jarvis, a knitwear designer from Brooklyn, New York (who created Stellar for this issue) the payoff is in the results that come with hours of effort. Knitting provides creative satisfaction; running delivers the healthier-feeling body Jarvis was seeking, but not finding, in other activities. As with the finishing of a sweater, the end of a run provided that wonderful feeling of having done all she could do to get where she wanted to be. "I love it," she says. " Run all the steps. It's exciting." Danielle Lightburn Dugan, a knitter and triathlete from Andover, Massachusetts, finds contentment in both the laps she runs and the rows she knits. "Knitting feeds my soul—the colour, the texture, the acts of making and giving, " she explains. "Running feeds my soul, too, but in different ways. It makes me feel strong and capable—both are good for quieting my mind."

Phoca PDF

Mel Vassey and the author running the Seacoast Half-Marathon.
Photo courtesy Mendy Howell, Red Maple Sportswear.

New to running, but not-so-new to knitting, Dr. Mel Vassey of Kittery Point, Maine, who blogs about yarn and other wooly things at cabezalana.blogspot.com, tackled his first two half-marathons this year (one of them with me in Portsmouth, New Hampshire). He approached his entry into running the same way he tackles his knitting: research, research, and more research. “I find that I'm drawn to the technical aspects of both running and knitting,” he explains. “With running, I like to learn more about the biomechanical aspects and what I can do to make myself better. With knitting, I like to study why stitches look the way they do and think about how that affects the fabric and the garment so that I can turn out a nicer product.” Both knitting and running have also brought Vassey their share of overuse injuries (tendons complain no matter what you've done to torture them), but he has learned to use the proper gear for each activity to avoid the muscular stresses and strains they both can cause.

British marathoner Susie Hewer takes the running /knitting connection quite literally. In order to raise awareness and money for the Alzheimer's Research Trust (she nursed her mother through

the final stages of the disease), she ran the 2007 London Marathon, knitting her way through the entire race. (A feat that set the Guinness World Record for the longest scarf knitted while running a marathon.) It's not a combination she encourages other to try. "It's a very silly thing to do," she says of running with needles. "There are many times when my arms hurt so much I want to sit at the side of the road and sob—I only put myself through it so that people ask me why I do it, and then I can tell them about the horrors of dementia and how research into the disease is underfunded." It's not surprising that Hewer, who blogs her running and knitting adventures at www.extremeknittingredhead.blogspot.com, seeks out challenges in her knitting as well. For example, for the past few years, she has been learning Fair Isle knitting, a technique her mother often used but she had never tried. What gets her to the finish line? "Sheer grit and determination," she says.

Running with sharp objects: Susie Hewer at mile 14 of the 2008 London Marathon.

Photo courtesy Susie Hewer

While finishing a knitted item, or a run, to the absolute best of one's ability, is certainly the end goal for knitters and runners, often times it's what you learn along the way that matters the most. Runners and knitters come in all shapes and sizes, and all skill levels, but we're all in it for the joy and the knowledge, internal or otherwise, both activities bring. Vassey puts it best, saying, “At the end of the day, I'm as much a 'process' runner as I am a 'process' knitter. I know that there will be good days and bad days with either, so I focus more on the meditative aspects—one foot in front of the other, one stitch after another—which is, in my opinion, a good way to approach life, in general.”

As the finish line at the Montréal Marathon finally looms in the distance, the weight of my journey, incredibly, starts to lift. The moments of feeling like I've broken my body into little pieces, just like those awful moments of tearing out whole sweaters' worth of what I thought was progress, disappear. All the steps, all the stitches, come together in that one leap across the finish line.

“Didja make that?” Yes, ma'am, I most certainly did.

At the finish line of the Seacoast Half-Marathon.
Photo courtesy Mendy Howell, Red Maple Sportswear.