What does it take to be a runner?

Several times I've been asked by my non-running friends about my running, and often the person asking the question responds with, “I don't know how you do it. I tried it, but just didn't like it.”

And therein lies the problem. When I first started at the age of 40, I didn't like it either. However, I had made a commitment; my running was going to be something I did, just like eating, sleeping or whatever for as long as possible. I was going to allot a slot in my day to run. It was going to be a lifetime commitment. It also was going to be a lifestyle change. Rather than spending hours practicing and playing golf, I was going to decrease my golf and increase my time to run. My golfing friends thought I was crazy and I'm not sure they were entirely wrong.

When in junior high and high school, I was in great condition when playing football, baseball and golf. None of those sports, though, required any long-distance running. In football, we just did 100-yard dashes. In baseball, we didn't even do that. In golf, the sprint was to the grill for food and drinks. I tried staying in condition by carrying my golf clubs and doing some weight lifting. But as I grew older, the conditioning started flagging and I was gaining weight.

Because longevity was a problem for the males on my father's side of the family, I decided I needed to find something else to do and improve my health. I read Jim Fixx's book about running and was inspired to start.

There was a vacant lot at the end of my street with a loop around it that was about six tenths of a mile. The first time I tried running around it, I didn't make it. But I didn't quit, though I wanted to. I kept going out and slowly increasing my distance. Many of those who have quit running before really getting into it, tried to do too much too fast, such as trying to run a mile the first time out rather than gradually increase distance. As the weeks passed, I eventually did five laps and celebrated. Now, maybe I could actually enter a 5K race and finish.

But I didn't. A 10K seemed like an impossible goal at that time, but I continued to train and nothing ever came easy during that time. When I suffered through 10 laps around the lot, I decided I was ready for a 10K, so I entered the Cowtown 10K. I didn't know what to expect, though I expected a lot of pain. When the race started, I tried to maintain a “comfortable” pace. Everything was going pretty good until the last mile and then I struggled and became somewhat frustrated because I believed I should be beating some of the people who were passing me down the hill on Exchange Ave. (back when the start/finish was in the Stockyards). After finishing, I had the mind-set of man runners – dang, I could have done better with a better training. So, I subscribed to *Runner's World* and tried just about every training scheduled it published. I bought a couple of running books.

It took me four or five years before I developed my own schedule, and when I reached my late 40s and early 50s, I was enjoying some of my best running -- and it was almost fun. And what I mean by fun is I've always thought that Fun Run was an oxymoron.

I was mostly finishing in the second or third wave of runners with 5K times in the low 21s during my best years (never did break 21, but came agonizingly close). I ran seven marathons, but beat four hours only once. My first marathon was 4:15 despite a slow final six miles.

Anyway, back to the subject. What does it take to become a runner? My simple answer is it just takes a lifetime commitment. Running is something you need to do on a regular basis just like eating and going to work (providing you go to work). And that's it. Remember, it might not be fun for awhile, but the more in shape you become, the more fun it becomes whether you're competitive or not.