

## **AGING RACEFULLY**

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In marathons maybe it's time to reconsider the present 5-year age groups. Maybe for shorter races too.

First there were men's races. Then there were races for men and older men called Masters – 40 and up. Then as the number of runners increased, 5-year age groups appeared, from 20-24, 25-29, all the way to 95 and up (in advanced cases). About 16 age groups total.

Somewhere along the line came races for women in a parallel pattern.

Why do we use age groups? Runners want to know how they compare with their peers in a race. What are their peers? People of the same sex and age. We want to measure our progress. If we get faster we enjoy it and want it publicly acknowledged. Age groups do that – without age groups there is only one winner. Age groups permit us to compete with the best among our peers.

A new age group is something to look forward to! Rather than begrudge your increased age you have a chance to do better in the next older age group (you will be the youngest).

Five- year age groups were thought a fair and equitable way to recognize, celebrate, reward and rank those whose bodies had either not yet fully matured in the sport (the young) and those whose physiques had suffered the numerous but uncatalogued ravages of time – all the rest of the runners who had passed the peak years.

Why do we use 5-year age groups? Convenient and simple. It evolved that way.

Why not 5-year age groups? Because age groups were intended to account for performance differences. Yes, we age. We get faster, then we stay the same for a long time, then we gradually get slower, then we get radically slower, in accordance with the curve below.

Age groups are fine but 5-year groups *don't represent equal performance gaps*. They compare apples to oranges.

Let's say that 10% of a marathon time be used to distinguish each age group from the next. Say the world record marathon men's time is 2:04, or 124 minutes, so 10% is about 12 minutes.

If then we use 12-minute finishing time intervals, here's the way the age groups go:

17-24, 25-44, 45-56, 57-65, 66-71, 72-74, 75-77, 78-79, total 8 groups to this point.

So the first age group covers 8 years, the next 20 years, the next 12, the next 9, then 6, 3, 3, and 2. Then 80,81,82,83,84,85,86,87,88,89,90,91,92 – and more if they show up! Thirteen one-year age groups, plus the 8 above = 21 total.

The decline of speed among the elderly is staggering, such that record speed for an 87 year old man is 1 hour and 8 minutes longer than for an 86 year old. The 12-minute interval doesn't work here, we would have to ask what day of what month were you born? Bring your driver's license to certify!

Under the present 5-year group system, if your age group is 75 to 79 the record times are 30 minutes apart, for just that one age group. If you're between 19 and 45 you are only about 12 minutes apart. So 5 age groups for a 12-minute performance gap, versus 1 age group for a 30-minute gap.

Indeed, should you have to compete with someone whose age predicts a half-hour advantage over you?

If you're 86 in a 70-and-up group, the 70-year old has a 2 hour and 39 minute advantage over you.

So group classes should reflect equal physical capability. Within reason. Not a group for every single year of your life, (until you're about 80). Perhaps a group separated by 12 minutes from the next. The 12-minute interval uses Running/USA National Marathon Age Record times (see curve below). If the fastest marathon time is 2:04 for the champion and 6:30 for the 92-year old, there is a 4.4 hour gap or about 22 twelve-minute groups or classes – as set out just above.

The 12-minute age groups truly would put real rivalry into some groups! You wouldn't be able to rely on your age to get an award, unless you are very old and the only dinosaur there! AGE IS AN ARTIFICIAL DISTINCTION.

The 12-minutes is maybe a true performance standard. It's equal opportunity, a level playing field.

In the corrals at big marathons, runners go into the 8-1/2, 9, 9-1/2 minutes per mile stalls. That's a rational performance standard. Age is incidental.

Why do our bodies change? It's called the aging process. At some age before 35 for us runners it includes a drop in VO2 max (the ability to convert oxygen you breathe to energy). It takes more energy to breathe, your heart doesn't pump as much as it did, metabolism changes, twitch muscles change. You get fewer miles to the gallon! We reach our peak marathon speed before 35 – somewhere!

What should new performance standard groups or classes use as their criterion? National records of fastest times for our age? World records for our age? Average times for our age?

World times would be ok for a basis if certified and readily available. National records seem well certified. Average times lock us to mediocrity.

A convenient listing of marathon speed records for every age from 4, 5, 6 (believe it or not!) to 92 (a little less for women) is at Running/USA.org., from which our curve is derived.

Actually any of these record lists would be fine to establish any age intervals, the exactness is unimportant considering the variation of marathon times now under the 5-year age group standard – say 13 *seconds* between 20 and 21 and 24 *minutes* between 79 and 80, and 68 *minutes* between 86 and 87.

A word about Boston: Qualifying time for 80 and above is 5 hours. Very few over 80 can qualify. There are national age record marathoners who can't beat 5 hours. That discriminates against these oldsters, *best in the country but not good enough for Boston. Why not use national record holder's times*, with an extra 10 to 30 minutes added on as tolerance, to qualify this handful of actually very distinguished runners? Don't the Boston standards qualify about 10% of the nation's marathoners now?

Acknowledging these oldest runners would apply to only about 20 runners in 20,000 runners, most of whom used to qualify easily for Boston.