

(Yonhap Feature) Seoul running clubs promote fun, camaraderie

*By Lisa Schroeder
Contributing writer*

SEOUL, March 7 (Yonhap) -- Park Jong-bin has run 30 marathons, two ultra-marathons and numerous half-marathons over the past 10 years but before that he says he used to hate running. Park, a native Korean, wanted to help others around Seoul erase any negative notions they might have of the activity and learn to enjoy it by founding the marathon-training club SmileRun.

"It is great for runners to have running friends," says Park.

"Running is a very basic sport, a kind of essential for any sports people," the marathoner adds. "And it's one of the best sports for health, particularly for those who want to be in good shape, to have a strong heart and lungs, and to have better blood circulation."

Running for fitness and for races has become more popular in Korea over the past decade. According to the latest figures from Statistics Korea, the number of businesses in the recreational, cultural and sporting activities sector grew by 16 percent while sales increased 42 percent.

Fitness industry suppliers are taking note. Treadmill developer Kim Woong-tae, the CEO of Nurytech Inc., says that his company is currently working on producing a new generation treadmill. Kim says they primarily sold their products overseas but now, "because there are a lot of fitness centers (in South Korea), we can focus on supplying the domestic market where the demand has grown."

In marathon racing alone, the number of participants for the Chuncheon International Marathon doubled from 10,000 in 2001 to 22,000 in 2011. And participants in Korea's initial marathon the Dong-A Seoul International grew six-fold from a little over 4,000 in 2001 to 24,000 in 2011.



Seoul Flyers members at the 2011 Chuncheon marathon
(Courtesy of Seoul Flyers)

SmileRun is a running club that brings together runners of all levels with the major goal of training for the Dong-A Seoul marathon held in late March and the Chuncheon and JoongAng marathons in the fall season. Although they only have a handful of people running at a time, they're serious about their runs. On a recent Saturday, Park says he ran 16 miles with American member Cindy Heckerl.

Heckerl, another accomplished marathoner and ultra-marathoner, encourages non-runners to try running. "If people start slowly, they might find that running can feel really good," she says. "There are many good places in Seoul to run, such as the Han River paths and Namsan, so it's a nice way to exercise outside and see different parts of the city. Some people also feel running is boring, so joining a club takes care of that problem."

SmileRun is just one of the assorted running clubs in Seoul. The running clubs vary from the more serious clubs like SmileRun and Seoul Flyers to clubs that focus more on socializing afterwards like the Southside Hash House Harriers.

Seoul Flyers' Vice President Leann Peters says that running and training for races in a group helps her challenge herself in ways that she can't achieve when she runs by herself. But she adds, "I think the SFs embody both fun and fitness very well. The group itself is very diverse, westerners as well as Asian cultures. Since we are first a running club, most of our events start with running. We do monthly social events to help people get to know each other in street clothes. After races, we often go out for

food."

The Southside Hash House Harriers is part of the worldwide Hash House Harrier movement that claims they are really a drinking club with a "running problem." It's a co-ed group that follows a chalk-marked trail that eventually ends up at a bar. The hare, one member who has around a 30-minute lead over the pack, runs ahead and marks the trail with colorful chalk arrows on the streets that the group has to find and follow.

Sam Nearing, a member of the SH3 since 2002, says, "As far as running is concerned, Hashers are free to do what they feel. The Hash is not a competition. There are no 'winners.'" Nearing adds. "The point is for everyone to get a bit of fresh, or Seoul-fresh, air, get a bit or a lot of exercise, and socialize. Hashes have people who walk every trail, people who jog, and serious-competitive runners looking for a not-so-serious way to get in a good run. You do what you feel like doing... The only goal being that of getting to the beer at the end point."



A group picture of the Southside Hash House Harriers at the end of a hash (Courtesy of Ben Min)

Once everyone has finished the hash and is at the bar, Nearing says, "The pack spends an hour or more munching snacks, drinking beer or wine or soju or makgeolli or water, discussing the trail, celebrating a wide range of milestones among the group and singing songs."

In addition to socializing, SmileRun's Park likes to be a bridge between foreign runners wanting to run and race here. "I am volunteering for any runners who need a training partner, need help with race information and registration, particularly those who have a language barrier."

Although the clubs show distinct variations in not only nationality, ethnicity and age, many of the members bemoan the lack of this diversity out on Seoul's regular streets.

"I think running is popular in Korea," says Seoul Flyers' Peters. "But for Koreans it's mostly popular with older men. There aren't many women in races. Also, there aren't many people under-30 or even under-40 out running."

schroederlis@yahoo.com