



## Embrace YOUR OWN Pace

As the weather gets colder, lots of things can make it tricky to get out for a run – but worrying about how fast you are doesn't need to be one of them

I should begin this article with an admission that my motivations are not purely journalistic. I have enjoyed running on and off for around a decade now, but my efforts to keep the habit up are consistently blighted by injury or a lack of running buddies to keep me accountable (my long-time jogging accomplice just moved to a different continent – rude). The other thing that gets in my way is comparison, both with my past self and others. It was hard not to find that period of lockdown where my friends and I decided to start sharing our activities on Strava a bit demoralising. How were these men that had never been on a run in their life suddenly managing 10 kilometres in 50 minutes?

So, when the algorithm started suggesting influencers describing themselves as 'slow runners' to me, I was thrilled. These were women who were serious about their running, and unashamedly continuing at a pace that suited them. A quick Google revealed a bigger movement: the Slow AF Run Club is a global online community founded by Martinus Evans for self-anointed 'slow runners' in New York. In particular, the pace that they preach is 'sexy pace'. This, the internet tells me, means running slowly enough that you can sustain a conversation. However, as nice as an online community is, what I really wanted was a group to join in person.

Consequently, on a drizzly Tuesday evening, I joined Simon Allen, a local running coach, at his None to Run group. The None to Run

programme does what it says on the tin, and is a 12-week programme designed to help people through their first three months of running. Simon explains that he prefers None to Run because it has a 'more gradual progression' than the well-known Couch to 5k, the aim of which is to get you running non-stop for 30 minutes by the end of nine weeks.

Simon's own story might explain why he is so well attuned to the barriers people face when they start running. He tells me that he didn't start running until he was 50, when he agreed to keep his wife company while she trained for a half marathon.

'We went about it in completely the wrong way. We went out and did a run and then we increased it by one kilometre every week, and I remember finishing at four kilometres and thinking, I will never be able to run a half marathon. Ever. And so we just stopped.'

Eventually he made his way back into running via shorter distances, but he tells me that it was joining a club that really made a difference. His advice for anyone starting out is to know that everybody who starts running starts slowly, and running is always hard. 'I actually think the hardest part is when you are in your first three months,' he says. 'The first few months are just so tough, so don't be embarrassed.'

Like myself, Simon believes that there shouldn't be any shame attached to the word 'slow' but a couple of the people I spoke to were understandably hesitant because, even with the best intentions, it is so open to misinterpretation. It is great to be able to reclaim words that might once have felt a little humiliating, but there can also be something a bit preemptively defensive about describing yourself as slow, especially if you are actually pushing yourself. And taking what you might perceive to be the average runner's slow pace for your slow runs, rather than going at a pace that genuinely feels manageable, could put you at risk of injury. It might seem hackneyed to say 'comparison is the thief of joy', but in this instance it is really important to be precise about the fact that slowness is always relative.

It also isn't a case of taking things easy just because something is better than nothing. Simon explains that, even if you are someone who wants to learn to run fast, at least 80 percent of your running should always be done at your slow pace. Running slowly is something to embrace rather than a caveat.

However, Simon's biggest piece of advice for new runners is to find a club.

With this in mind, I spoke to the founders of two running clubs in Yorkshire: 'These Girls Run' and 'Fit Mums and Friends', where the ethos is firmly on the social aspect of running. They employ various techniques to make sure that runners of all paces can stick together.

Molly Slater founded These Girls Run in October 2021. She was living in York at the time, and had enjoyed running through the summer but wanted a group to run with for safety as the nights got darker. They now have events across the country, including Leeds, Newcastle, and their recently revived York group. To take part, the only requirement is to buy a ticket on their website and turn up at the appointed place and time.

'I've made a conscious effort to make sure that we don't have set paces for the groups because I think that can be quite unnerving,' Molly explains. 'What we do instead is we have a These Girls Run ambassador at the front, middle and back of every single run and their job is to lead the way but make sure that everyone around them is happy and supported. If a girl running with us wants to walk it out then they absolutely can and an ambassador will stay with them. The role of the ambassador is to make sure that no girls get left behind. We want to make sure that anyone that comes to our runs feels like they can be a runner.'

Samantha Barlow is the founder of Fit Mums and Friends, a charity that has now branched well beyond just running (think cycling, singing and even forestry). She tells me that they are also committed to making sure their running groups are suitable for anyone who is willing to put on some trainers (and you don't have to be a Mum).

'Our systems mean that your pace absolutely doesn't matter. People think, I'll be too slow. We use something called shepherding and it basically means if a gap develops between the front person and the back person, the leader will indicate that [the runners at the front] should turn around and run back. We have a thing called Fit Mums and Friends 'etiquette' which means that they don't just go to the back person, they go beyond the back person and that means the person at the back is then at the front. Typically, that person never gets to be at the front, so it's a lovely moment.'

Indeed, this system works so well that members of Fit Mums and Friends can enjoy completely different training sessions on the same run. 'We teach our run leaders so that within a group you can have some people who are just running the distance and chatting, but you can put in speed sections for those that want them, so you might send them to run ahead to a certain point at pace and then to turn and come back at pace.'

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All the run leaders I spoke to agreed that the key to getting in to running isn't pushing yourself to extremes, but you do need to make it a priority. A running group can be really helpful for this because, as Sam puts it, 'it's just like another date in your diary, it's a commitment'.

That doesn't mean that you need to upend your life and become a fitness fanatic to make it work. In fact, Molly suggests that this could be counter-productive. 'Try and fit your running plan into your existing routine,' she says. 'If you're all of a sudden start getting up at 5am to fit a run in when normally you get up at 7am, that's not gonna be something that will be sustainable for you.'

If you are still feeling paranoid that other runners will be frustrated by your speed, it might be reassuring to hear that Molly and Sam think a lot of their members are primarily there for the chat. Although sitting down for cake and a cuppa might seem like the less strenuous route to socialising, Molly points out that, in terms of social-ease, that isn't necessarily the case.

'When you're trying to make friends and you get a coffee with someone and you're sat across the table from them, it can be quite daunting. But when you're running, it opens up a whole new space for conversation.'

There are probably more scientific reasons to explain this, but to my mind, Molly's observation is instinctively true for a number of reasons. Firstly, if you find yourself out of small-talk, the run itself is always fair game for conversation. Secondly, if you are someone who finds themselves suddenly doubting yourself when it comes to social cues like eye-contact, looking ahead of you is absolutely acceptable (and preferable if you'd like to stay upright). Thirdly, the effort of running keeps you alert and in the present, so it's less likely that you'll suddenly find yourself five minutes behind on the conversation because you were worrying about a work deadline.

Both Sam and Molly feel so enthused by the benefits that being able to run and talk in this way, that their groups avoid using 'slow' lest they imply that there is anything less than optimal about the pace that their running devotees choose. Instead, 'steady' is the terminology that both groups independently landed on.

Whether you prefer to wear 'slow' with pride, or would rather think of yourself as going steady, Molly summarises the rewards perfectly. 'If you're running at a pace that's comfortable to you then it probably means that you can run a bit longer or, actually, you enjoy it more.'

A certain fable involving a tortoise and a hare comes to mind...

[thesegirlsrun.co.uk](http://thesegirlsrun.co.uk)  
[fitmums.org.uk](http://fitmums.org.uk)