

A Visit with George Sheehan

By Steven Jonas, MD, MPH

I recently came across an old manuscript of mine on the great “running doctor” George Sheehan, MD. For the most part, it is the text of a eulogy that I was privileged to give at the AMAA memorial service held for him and his family in New York City after his death in 1993. As I read through the material, I thought that a revisit with George and some of his thoughts might be a perfect way to head into spring when we once again begin talking about training with patients, athletes we coach, and groups of athletes and potential athletes whom we address.

I first heard of Dr. George Sheehan in the 1970s, some years before I started running myself. Jim Fixx had put running and himself into the general public’s consciousness with the publication of *The Complete Book of Running*. It sold a phenomenal 700,000 copies in hardcover. And close on his heels, literally as well as figuratively, came George Sheehan, MD. George published several very popular books himself and although he was a cardiologist, his books

were hardly medical. Jim Fixx explained the practical side of running; George explored the spiritual side, and hit a responsive chord.

George began running when he was 45 or so, about the same age I was when I took up the sport (about 20 years after him). One difference between us was that George was fast. He loved to race, did it with great frequency, and consistently won in his age group. Further, to him, running was the sport. Not swimming, not biking, and certainly not walking. When, in 1986, I sent him a copy of my book *Triatbloning for Ordinary Mortals*, his comments implied that the sport was cobbled together. To George, it was not real and certainly not pure, like running.

One of George’s most admirable characteristics, however, was the ability to look at himself, and to grow and change. And so, when an illness slowed down his running, George tried cycling and found that he liked it. He lived near the New Jersey Shore and had been a swimmer in his youth. Obviously, for an adventuresome sort like George, triathlon was not far behind. In his late 60s, he took it up with his customary verve. Soon he became a proponent of the sport.

George’s view on walking changed too. In 1986, he said, “Walking is the best exercise of all. It requires little or no instruction... Walking is also virtually free of injury... Walking is a gentle, effective way to become fit.”

Personal Best (1989), George’s next to last book, is a guide to living the healthy life in body, mind, and spirit. But this book does not present the kind of “left-brain” orderly problem and solution type of plan I usually prefer. Instead, it is written from the “right-brain” perspective that George found so comfortable.

George knew what he wanted to do alright. But rather than following the traditional medical “if then, then what” approach, he accomplished his purpose by discussing his thoughts, feelings, experiences, perceptions, and emotions as he went through various life stages (some happy, some not-so-happy). And in doing so, he was a very effective teacher.

The essence of George Sheehan was that even when a life experience was not a happy one—getting cancer or losing a loving relationship—if he put his mind to it, he would try to become a



George Sheehan, MD, at his home at the New Jersey Shore. (Photo Credit: Angelo Caggiano)

better person for it. George never lost his love of life, his zest for it, and his ability to learn from it, even as he was in the last stages of his own life. Like the good competitive runner and Satchel Paige, he never looked back; George always looked ahead.

In a chapter on public speaking, George explained that for most of his scheduled speaking engagements he prepared two talks: "My 'right brain speech,' which is mainly inspiration and motivational, and my 'left brain speech,' which is an outline of the basic facts on exercise" (*Personal Best*, p. 172). While he always had some left-brain material ready in case of emergency (i.e., an audience filled with physicians), George was obviously most comfortable with his right-brain talk. And so were most of his audiences. After all, why go to hear George Sheehan tell us about aerobic heart-rate ranges or training programs; we could get that out of a book. We wanted George to inspire us, to help us achieve insight, and to help us discover that "aha" moment. That's all right brain stuff.

I ordinarily do not do well on the "road less travelled," right-brain books. The formlessness and seeming aimlessness of many of them leaves me puzzled and often distracted after a few pages. But George's right-brain perspective somehow reached out to left-brained me while also holding onto the right-brained readers. That's a reflection of his unique ability and attraction. I suppose, too, that it's a reflection of the fact that while George was a right-brained person, he was also a physician and knew how to speak from his left-brain to physicians.

Personal Best begins with life and ends with death but in the George Sheehan's typical way, it's approached in an up-beat and optimistic fashion. I cannot do justice to George's prose by trying to describe it. Rather, I will share a few of my favorite quotes from the book. Believe me, if you read it, you will find many more tidbits to enhance the mind-body aspect of your training.

On Life: "The normal life was one of continual expansion (p. 3)." "Life is not a skill sport. . . It is a game that anyone can play and play well (p. 5)." "The diligent use of our allotted life span is the secret of the successful life (p. 5)."

On Death: "Death makes the everyday magical, the ordinary unique, the commonplace one-of-a-kind (p. 230)." "Once I accept death, I center on the present (p. 233)." "To have a death worth dying, you must have a life worth living (p. 233)."

In between life and death, George talked about motivation, setting goals, running for the mind, the true meaning of racing, happiness, sadness, love, aloneness, relationships, the mind and healthy aging, and being healthy. He also

dealt with some medical profession stuff. But even while conveying practical advice, which he did from time to time, George easily encompassed the spiritual aspect as well. For example, when considering whether walking is a "real" exercise, he said, "The common denominator here is motion. Life is movement (p. 115)."

George Sheehan's book is filled with wisdom. Exquisite thoughts are to be found on almost every page. Let me just share a few more of them with you. *On motivation*: "No motivation can live where faith and courage are absent (p. 15)." *On goal-setting*: "My end is not simple happiness. My need, drive, and desire is to achieve my full and complete self (p. 21)." *On health*: "Health makes for the happy pursuit of happiness and gives us a longer time to do it (p. 24)."

On racing: "It's the race that challenges me, not the finish line (p. 30)." *On exercise and health*: "The simplest way to preserve health is to exercise (p. 33)." *On running and the mind*: "So where do you find the life of the mind? Within yourself, the self that is nurtured and freed by running (p. 40)." *On heart disease*: "People who die of heart disease do so because they have not yet learned how to live (p. 53)." *On the control issue*: "Coping means to take the initiative, to strike back, to take charge, to dominate (p. 82)." *And finally, on happiness*: "Happiness we receive from ourselves is greater than that we receive from our surroundings (p. 134)."

George Sheehan died of prostate cancer on November 1, 1993. There will never be another like him. He had a unique gift: the ability to communicate with virtually everyone, expressing thoughts that reflect the center of man's existence. We are all the better for having had George Sheehan in our midst.

REFERENCES

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