



A Marathon Inside the Fence

MacLaren youth rack up miles through a running club, while learning to de-stress and reach goals.

By [Sarah Evans](#), OYA Communications
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Ten youth gather behind a start line painted on the asphalt drive between the south side cottages at MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility. They hardly seem to notice the January morning chill, hovering around 37 degrees.

Soon they'll be sweating with the effort of running 10K — 6.2 miles — for MacLaren's annual Resolution Run. Some haven't run much in the past, but, for a few, this race is a blip in training for their ultimate goal: a marathon.

Among them is Kelli, earbuds pumping beats into his ears, his gaze focused on the route ahead. When he stepped onto the course for MacLaren's half marathon last July, he'd never run before. Not only did he complete the event with a decent time, but now he's training for this April's marathon inside the fence. His longest run so far: 20 miles.

"It's one of my biggest outlets here," he says. "After I run, especially a long one, I'm more calm and satisfied. Everything is mellow."

That's one of the goals MacLaren staff had in mind when they started the Hawks Running Club nearly two years ago.

"A lot of the youth are starting to use running as a coping skill," says Group Life Coordinator Scott Palmer, who facilitates the club along with Shannon Wilhelm, Jeff Mekkers, and Jorge Pelinski. "When they're getting stressed out, they'll go out for a run and it helps clear their head."

Modeled loosely on the Oregon State Penitentiary's popular running program, which started in the early 1970s, MacLaren's program comprises four running groups each week, plus a handful of organized events



Casey, who is training for a marathon, crosses the finish line at the Resolution Run.



Kelli had never run before when he finished the half marathon last summer. Now he's also training for a marathon.

annually: several 5Ks, the 10K, a half-marathon, and — new this year — the marathon.

Staff members measured a one-mile lap and a two-mile lap through the facility, and the youth alternate between the routes, depending on the overall length of the race.

Any MacLaren youth can participate in the regular weekly runs, but, for the marathon, youth had to sign up last fall to train properly. A dozen youth registered initially; about seven or eight still are training. They meet one Saturday a month for long runs.

The aspiring marathoners are getting elite help from a volunteer coach: Olympian Ian Dobson, who ran the 5,000m in the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing. He coaches Team Run Eugene as well as several community running programs.

“I’ve learned a lot about the relationship of work to reward through running, and I hope it can play a role in bringing meaning and purpose to people’s lives,” Dobson says.

“Running can serve as a filter that the youths’ other decisions go through: How could this conflict impact my running? How do my choices regarding friends, food, or controlled substances impact my running? Running is a privilege, and I hope it can lay a foundation of discipline and fun that extends into the rest of their lives.”

Dobson and his team donated new and slightly used running shoes to the youth, a big improvement over their state-issued basketball shoes. A December fundraiser at Roadrunner Sports in Tualatin helped the team get additional running gear, and LifeSource Natural Foods in Salem donates monthly food items to help the youth get the proper fuel for their long runs.

Wilhelm, MaClaren’s acting treatment services supervisor, says that watching the youth thrive in the club has become one of the highlights of her job.

“Some of them use this group to help motivate them not to go back to old risky behaviors,” she says. “They love the freedom out on the course of not having to have someone watch them the entire time.”

That’s definitely true of Casey, another youth training for the marathon. “I feel free. There’s nothing else when I run that matters,” he says. “It’s just me and the pavement. ... It’s a good coping mechanism while you’re here.”



Scott Palmer (second from right) and Shannon Wilhelm (right) tell the youth about their running route.



Volunteer coach Ian Dobson, an Olympic runner, helped get the youth proper running shoes for their training.

Many of the youth say they want to continue running when they are back in the community because “it makes them feel better,” Palmer says.

That includes Kelli. When you ask about his future running plans, he sets his sights high: He’d like to compete in the Great Wall Marathon in China.

“Whenever I run, I feel at peace with myself,” he says. “That’s a lot of what keeps me going.”