

## Peace of Mind & Strength of Body

**Captain Greg Dawson**  
Makes Running Part of His Healthy Lifestyle

*by Greg Lilly, Lifestyle Editor*



Navy Captain Greg Dawson started running for fun in grade school. “At the very beginning,” he explains, “my interest stemmed from being an undersized, uncoordinated kid, not really good in too many sports. I think it’s a common story for people who discover running at an early age.” Racing, playing, competing with the other kids in grade school, Greg discovered he had a knack for running. That spurred competitive running, which extended through junior high and high school.

Greg grew up in Spokane, WA. During high school, a friend had become excited about the Naval Academy. His enthusiasm spread to Greg. The friend (now former reality-TV star Roger Carstens) later decided to attend West Point, but Greg kept his sights on the Academy. After high school graduation, Greg went to Annapolis and enrolled in the Naval Academy.

“During my first year at the Naval Academy,” he says, “I realized I wasn’t enjoying running as much. It really was stressing me out. I was so focused on the competitive aspects of it that I got burned out. I quit the team.” For the next twenty years, Greg ran sporadically. “If someone

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asked, I'd say, 'Yeah, I'm a runner.' But I didn't run more than...maybe once a week."

In 2003, the Navy stationed Greg in Guam. "They have a lot of races in Guam, pretty much every weekend there's a road race somewhere," he says. "I started running races here and there, and I felt excited about it again."

A transfer to Yorktown a couple of years later allowed Greg to settle in Williamsburg. "When I got here, I saw there was a 5K at Warhill," he says. "So I ran it and didn't do spectacularly well. Rick Platt, the president of the Colonial Road Runners walked up and said, 'Hey, I haven't seen you before.' He invited me to do intervals on Wednesday with the club." Running intervals, or sprints with intermittent rest periods, builds a runner's ability to tap into a faster pace when needed. "That started my involvement with the Colonial Road Runners" he adds. "Since then, I've become more disciplined about running [and] continually gotten more into it, and improved a bit."

Greg's favorite time to run is in the mornings. "I suppose I'm a little bit obsessive/compulsive," he admits, "and it's become a part of my routine. It's what I do. I know it's different for different people. For some people, it's like an itch they can't satisfy unless they run. For me, it's like a nagging guilt thing."

But guilt and compulsion aren't the only things that motivate Greg to lace up his shoes and hit the road on early mornings. "What do I get out of it?" he ponders. "The obvious things: cardiovascular health, muscle tone, and weight control. More than that, when I'm running, it really establishes a framework for the other parts of my life. It helps me have some structure and discipline for all aspects of life." Two of the biggest components of this foundation are his concentration on eating healthy and getting enough rest. "I'm thinking, I'll miss my run if I don't get enough rest," he says. "I'm thinking about food because, when I'm running, it's a healthy lifestyle. It makes me think if I'm running, why eat a bag of chips or a doughnut? I want to eat healthy things. It makes my whole mindset a healthy living lifestyle."

Along with the physical, he finds a mental benefit. "Running gives you the opportunity to totally indulge in daydreaming," Greg says. "Most of my running is by myself and that's the time that I don't have to feel guilty about thinking about things and not getting other work done. It gives me peace of mind."

Although the Zen nature of running attracts many people, Greg says there's a camaraderie factor too. "Running with others is a huge social interaction and opportunity. With the Colonial Road Runners, it's a great bunch of people. I've made a lot of friends, gotten to know a lot of people in the area. We do intervals on Wednesdays, sometimes a few of us get together for weekend runs, and then the races we have - there are a lot of social opportunities." A few times a year, the group forms a team to compete in USA Track & Field events. "It's a fun bonding experience that I haven't had since high school," he adds.

Greg offers some tips for anyone new to running or starting up again after a long hiatus. First, always see a doctor to make sure you're cleared for launch.

"Start slow and easy," Greg says. "Don't think that because you could run a ten-mile run in high school at a 6:30 pace that you can do it now." Many factors change over the years, not the least of which is age, but also current conditioning and activity levels.

It's also important to find a good pair of shoes to work out in.

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“You don’t need to spend \$120 on running shoes,” Greg advises, “but you should go to a running specialty store and see someone who knows about running shoes. They can tell based on your body type and the kind of running you are interested in doing, what type of shoes you should get. There’s a lot of variety. All shoes aren’t right for all people. That’s important.”

Forget the stopwatch. “Some people want to jump in and do speed work to see how fast they can run a mile,” Greg says. “You’ll end up hurting yourself or getting frustrated and quitting. Take it easy on yourself. Build up slowly.”

Running can be stressful to knees. “Some genetics are involved,” Greg says. “Some people are blessed with a physiology that keeps them going.” For others, some things may help prevent knee stress. “Stretching,” he says. “And having the right shoes and replacing them periodically.” A good rule of thumb is to replace old or worn out shoes after three to five hundred miles, or if you have shoes that are older than two years, it’s probably best to start a running regimen with a new pair. “Have two pair that you can rotate,” Greg advises, “they wear better and they can dry out if they get wet.”

Also, it helps to run on soft surfaces when you can. “Grass is better than paved surfaces,” he says. “Not everybody does this, but I do: I run a couple of times a week on a treadmill to give my knees a break. Back when I was thirty and getting back into running, I could run for two weeks at a time, then I would have to take two weeks off because of my knees would hurt so bad. Now, by wearing the right shoes, using the treadmill, and running on soft surfaces when I can, I can run every day.”

Even the best athletes can’t run hard every day. Greg suggests structuring a routine to include easy days. “The easy days are as important as the hard days,” he adds. “In fact, you should have more easy days than hard days - like a 2 to 1 ratio, a couple of days of slow, easy running then a day of harder and faster runs, or a good, long run.”

A favorite point Greg likes to make is that one of the beautiful things about running is that your main competition is yourself. “You always know how you did last week, or a month ago, to compare yourself with,” he says. “You don’t have to worry about the other people out there that are faster than you.”

Greg says, “Williamsburg is just a great place to run.” He cites some of his favorite trails and routes around the area. Many neighborhoods have routes, and back roads offer picturesque scenery. “Warhill High School,” he says, “and down Longhill Road, [is] nice. Warhill has a loop that goes over soft, groomed trails, which are great to run on.” He says he loves Newport News Park, “technically, not Williamsburg, but close,” he adds. “The bike trail there is 5.3 miles and you can run it consecutive times to get in a longer run. It’s connected to the Yorktown Battlefields, a nice cut out for some variety. It’s just gorgeous.”

Greg sets goals each year. “That’s one of the things great about running,” he says. “I can always compare times from last week or even last year. It’s a sport with specific metrics that can be measured. Not so much against other people since so many other factors come in, but, personal goals to achieve a certain time or distance.” One of his goals several years ago was to qualify for the Boston Marathon. “I finally did that. Then I wanted to break three hours at a marathon, and I did that a year ago at the Shamrock Marathon. This year, I’m hoping to break seventeen minutes in a 5k.” NDN

