



by John D. McDonald, GE Grid Solutions, USA

# Running in a New Direction:

## A Mid-Life Awakening to Fitness for the Future

An old adage has it that “it’s never too late.” It’s a flexible adage and can be applied to everything from apologies to taking up piano. In my case we’re talking about a renewed, mid-life dedication to physical fitness, a new-found taste for competitive running and the benefits these pursuits bestow on my family and professional life.



PROOF PROOF

1 John flexing

## 2 Group 5K race - May 2017



**I’m a competitor at heart.** This applies to academics, business, sports, chili dog and pie-eating contests - you name it. In high school I played baseball and football. In college I played handball and table tennis. After college I played fast-pitch softball, flag football and tennis. I still keep a ping-pong table outside my home office for the rare occasions when I lure a worthy opponent into battle.

Many of you will recognize the next phase. I competed my way into the executive ranks of major players in the power industry, flew four million airline miles and churned out a steady flow of papers and books. I enjoyed many a long, late night dinner with colleagues and customers all over the world. I

devoted myself to success in my field in order to provide for my family.

Something had to give. Turns out, it was my waistline. I let the belt out a notch every so often and rationalized the adjustment. By my late-50s, I’d succeeded in business, cared for my family - and gotten soft, even chunky. My lifestyle was exacting a toll.

Perhaps my lovely wife, Jo-Ann, was too diplomatic to say anything. But my kids noticed. And they held me to account. One morning in Spring 2010 my daughter, Sarah, said, “Dad, you need to come to ‘boot camp’ with me.” I knew she was right.

**A New Guru:** Sarah took me to The Body Firm, her workout location, and introduced me to the

owner and trainer, Dez White. When you meet Dez (check out his pose here) you realize this gentleman has taken a natural gift and dedicated himself to realize his full potential as an athlete, an entrepreneur, a family man - he's really together. Edward Dezmon White played on a winning high school football team and then college football for the Georgia Tech Yellow Jackets. In 2000 Dez was selected in the third round of the NFL draft by the Chicago Bears and played briefly for the Atlanta Falcons. Pursuing business interests after pro sports led him to found The Body Firm.

That morning with Sarah my legs were shaking, and I was exhausted - just warming up for the workout! I attended another workout, which confirmed that I had, shall we say, a situation on my hands. Sarah and my son, Mark, who works out regularly and is a competitive runner, followed up with a Father's Day gift of four training sessions with Dez in June 2010.

I procrastinated. I remained consumed by work. I still leaned on the self-delusion that pursuing fitness would eat into my dedication to business success. Months flew by. When I didn't show up, Dez offered Sarah and Mark their money back.

**One Cookie Too Many:** Fast forward to Christmas 2010: the holidays, the cookies, the sweets. I'd always been blessed with a good metabolism. I'd never hesitated to enjoy a good meal and maybe just one more cookie. By this time, however, I'd turned 59 and my metabolism had slowed. I hit my all-time-peak weight of 232. I'd been in denial and I told myself:

"I need a big change. My priorities are all messed up. Why am I putting so much emphasis on work alone? I have one body for this life and I need to take better care of it."

Once I admitted the truth, I made a decision. After New Year's (and the cookies were finally, mysteriously, all gone), I embarked on a new regime. With my life-long competitive spirit rekindled, I knew that adding an

early morning workout would actually facilitate professional success and benefit my family.

**The Long Road Ahead:** So, I went to see Dez. I told him I'd turned a corner and needed a trainer. Over time, his aura of professional athlete/celebrity wore off and he became my personal trainer and a real friend who my family adores. He grasped my innate competitiveness and set goals, even devising competitions of sorts between us. (With a generous handicap for his client.)

Dez made me keep a daily journal of what I ate, how many hours I slept, and how much I weighed each morning. I did weight training, cardio workouts, something new every day. We devised three goals: become lean, strong and fast on my feet.

The weight started to come off, slowly. I honed my discipline. Yet my weight would plateau for weeks on end. Dez advised me, your body needs to adjust. You'll keep attaining new calibration points. Our two families grew close. For me, there was a lot at stake: both families were in on my challenge. I had to succeed! Often a little pressure is a good motivator.

### 3 Boot camp group photo - December 2016



If I had to boil it down, I'd say: better foods, portion control, and regular exercise are keys to happiness and success. Push yourself, but don't over-do it.

**My First Turkey Trot:** Five weeks before Thanksgiving 2011, my son Mark - Georgia Tech graduate, then working for GE in Schenectady, New York - called me.

"You and I are running a 5K Turkey Trot on Thanksgiving morning. You'll have fun. Don't worry."

Well, I didn't worry, but I went straight to Dez and told him I'd be running a five-kilometer (3.1 miles) race in five weeks. He got me focused on cardio workouts and good running mechanics.

T-day came. I was among 55 men in the 55-59 age group in a field that totaled more than 5,000 people who finished the race. Mark is a gazelle and soon vanished with his age group once the race began. Although I didn't know the route and had no GPS watch (didn't know my pace), I finished 20 seconds out of third place. And I'm not a fourth-place kind of guy. The top three finishers in each age group receive trophies.

"I'm good at this," I told myself. "I did it because Mark asked me. If I really trained, what could I have done?"



Edward Dezmon

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**Challenging the Trainer:** I ran a few more 5Ks in 2012 and then the annual Turkey Trot here in Atlanta was looming. I challenged Dez to join me. This guy was a wide receiver and, apart from football, excelled as a sprinter on the Georgia Tech track team and excelled in soccer in high school. In that context, a 5K is a long-distance race. So, we trained together for it. I'm 60, Dez is 32. He gave me a three-minute handicap, one minute for each decade of age difference! I poured my heart into training and I ran my personal best ever: 23 minutes 26 seconds, which was nearly three consecutive 7-minute miles. I took first place among the 60-64 age group, blowing away the field and winning my bet with Dez. He and his wife took me and Jo-Ann out for a barbecue dinner.

I found that I was good at running, I enjoyed it, I could participate in a sport with my kids, and I had a blossoming friendship with a trainer who enjoyed my progress.

The daily, first-thing-in-the-morning workouts sent me to the office feeling that I could conquer any challenge. Working out was good for business.

**Data Analytics for Fitness:** Dez is a tech-savvy guy, so he favors using performance data to measure progress in a fitness program. Thus, I use the Garmin

Vivoactive 3 watch and an external heart monitor to measure my heart rate over a 45-minute boot camp workout, and then use the Garmin app on my iPhone to identify the peak and the averages throughout the workout. My goal is to seek an average of 145 heartbeats per minute. Over time, working out and running to attain a steady, elevated heart rate became more important than winning races.

**Further Successes:** Given my story, I hope you'll allow me to crow over winning another first place in the 60-69 age group in the September 2017 "Mayor's 5K on the 5th Runway" at the Hartfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport. We ran this in pre-dawn darkness, as it really is the fifth runway, which had to be cleared for the day's flights.

Another feat to share: two months later, I ran the World's Tallest Indoor Stair Climb Race at the Willis Tower's (formerly Sears Tower) 105 stories in Chicago. I ran it in 30 minutes 27 seconds with my son Mark and his wife, Meeta. (Mark was long gone, but I passed Meeta on the 25th floor, as she was catching her breath.) I never stopped until I got to the top. (Sounds like a potentially ruthless motto, doesn't it?) At age 65, I placed 18th among 61 finishers

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in the 60 to 69 age group; just finishing was a triumph that day.

**Overcoming Mental Barriers:** I learned from Dez that the mind plays tricks on the body. Your mind tells you you're tired. Dez trained me to realize that I have more left in reserve than I suspect. He demonstrated that to me during workouts. In nine years, I've never done less than Dez assigned me that day, even when I'm traveling. I use many fitness and strengthening routines: "Goblet" squats, single leg extensions holding dumbbells, tossing a 20-pound medicine ball high up a wall, swinging a 50-pound kettle bell above eye level, a 7½ -minute mile on the treadmill with a 10% incline, then rotations with only leg power on the "deadmill," an unplugged treadmill. Don't roll your eyes when your trainer pushes you. Just go for it.

Today, pushing 70, I don't run to win. I regulate and elevate my heart rate and focus on leanness and strength and less on speed. The focus is on fitness for well-being.

**On the Road:** I look forward to working out every weekday and allow the weekends for my body to heal. Early in the morning, I simply get

#### 4 John and Dex bench press



Don't roll your eyes when your trainer pushes you. Just go for it.

#### 5 John and alternating shoulder presses



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up, stretch, and undertake Dez's workout for the day. It's different every single day, which keeps it interesting.

Here's a key piece for road warriors. I allow myself no excuses on the road. I hit the hotel gym early each morning or I join colleagues who run. We always take a route that takes us past that city's unique sights and architecture as we huff and puff along. Dez monitors my heart rate from a half a world away. So, there's no losing ground while globe-trotting on business. Occasionally, I've been surprised how altitude affects me in Denver (5,280 feet elevation) and, more pronouncedly, in Quito, Ecuador (9,350 feet). Now I check elevation before working out to adjust my expectations.

**Looking Back:** Working out first thing in the morning provides me with a sense of accomplishment before the business day has begun. I come away convinced that work and the world generally can't throw anything at me that I can't handle. I feel great, confident, on top of the world. I know I'm doing good things for myself and that better enables me to do good things for others. This attitude and a well-exercised body reduce stress. I'm more productive and efficient. Work actually benefits from my workouts. I long ago lost the fear that working out would cut into my professional life. These days, not many much younger boot campers at The Body Firm can keep up with me. Dez even holds me up as an example. (In so many words: "If this old duffer can turn it around through discipline and hard work, so can you!")

If I had to boil it down, I'd say: better foods, portion control, and regular exercise are keys to happiness and success. Push yourself, but don't over-do it. You don't need to win races. Track



5K race - 2nd place in age groups - August 2017

your heart rate. Pursue controlled, balanced workouts. Listen to your body and act on it.

Frankly, men tend not to be as good as women at this. Look around the airport when you're traveling. Men my age tend to have big guts. That's a crux point.

There's a critical phase in middle age when you can choose to pursue being lean and strong or face a point of no return.

Thanks to my family and my trainer, I'm enjoying another phase in life. I started this journey at age 59. It's never too late. ■

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## 6 John & Mark - Duke 5K Trail



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## 7 John's family - November 2018



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