



The Guru of Go

When John Stanton discovered running, it changed his life, and he's been spreading the word ever since

By Peter Feniak

What's a perfect day for John Stanton?
"A perfect day? I get up at 5:30 or 6 and go for a run. I come back, hop on my bike, go for a bike ride. Stop at the gym, do a light workout. Then come back, go play a round of golf with my wife."

This man enjoys exercise a lot more than your average 62-year-old. He's proud of it. He was an overweight, chain-smoking grocery executive when his kids talked him into trying a three-kilometre "fun run," and before long something clicked in him. Now he's known coast-to-coast as the founder of the Running Room (now including the Walking Room), an empire of some 100 stores across Canada and into the United States.

Acknowledged as a top business thinker and marketer, Stanton is also an evangelist for exercise, a salesman for getting in shape, a fitness guru committed to "empowering" others with the gifts that come with physical fitness. He is also the face of his business, making endless personal appearances. He's written six popular books on running and walking. By supporting community running events, the Running Room has helped raise millions for charity. For his charitable work and for inspiring Canadians to live healthier lives, Stanton was named to the Order of Canada in 2009.

He doesn't rest on his laurels. With company headquarters in Stanton's hometown of Edmonton, a distribution centre in Toronto, and running events almost anywhere, he says he spends "way too much time in the air. I think I travel more than some of the flight attendants. April through to November, every weekend is booked for me, and there are no days off over the summer." If it ever threatens to overwhelm him, he has a solution. Winter or summer, every day, he runs.

"There are days I'll run three to five K just to clear my head. Then one day per week I like to get at least a 12- to 15-K run in—by myself, to kind of loosen up. And then the rest of the time is running with other people 'cause I'm at these events."

We're in a corner of a huge, noisy convention hall decked out like a country fair. It's the pre-race centre for the Scotiabank Toronto Waterfront Marathon, with booths everywhere celebrating running, walking, getting fit, staying in shape, and eating right. Stanton, only slightly

weary from all those road miles, is a featured guest, happy to spread the word about how lives can change once you get moving.

"Because I'm a born-again runner, a born-again athlete, I think I can relate to a lot of people who walk into our store. It takes a little

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courage. The main thing that keeps people from exercising is fear of embarrassment. You know, we're carrying a little extra weight, maybe even smoking, we've been away from exercise for a while. We don't want somebody to see us out huffing and puffing through the neighbourhood. I've found that if you put people in a group environment, running or walking with people with like ability, it changes."

Hard Work and Lessons Learned

In 1981, when Stanton's sons, John, Jr., and Jason, invited him to try the fun-run, the 238-pound, two-pack-a-day smoker was indeed "huffing and puffing through the neighbourhood," slowing to walk, out of breath. Gradually, he improved and—as he'll tell you—so did his life. By 1984, he was enjoying his new hobby so much he started a business on the side. In an 8 x 10 space at the front of an old house shared with a hairdressing shop, the Running Room was launched as a fitness store that also served as a meeting place for runners.

"When I first started, it was very much a competitive, go-hard mentality. Who could win? Who was faster? We would meet in a local park, then take off, and it was sort of, who could be king of the hill and first back? But I thought, 'That's the dumbest thing—go out for a group run and then run away from everybody. We're going to discourage people.' We started the different pace groups.



“And today that’s what you see: people running in different pace groups. It’s odd to see that lonely solitary runner now. You see couples. You see guys that meet at noon hour or after work, women that meet for their group run. Women really want to understand the sport. Guys kind of look at it and say, ‘Well, any idiot can run.’ Women are much more open to getting advice. Now guys are listening, too. And the whole social element has made it more fun.”

At the Running Room/Walking Room, staff evaluate customers and teach according to systems worked out over time by Stanton and long-time employees.

“We’re very much a hands-on family business. My two sons are partners in the company, and we have a big team of people who’ve worked for us over the years and have been so loyal to us. We have about 1,400 employees now.”

Born in the small town of Tofield, AB, John Stanton grew up in Edmonton. His dad “was an entrepreneur, like me,” he says; he had “very good parents.” He was restless and out of school early, working in a grocery store as a bag boy, but he climbed quickly.

“The first guy I worked for in an IGA store was very disciplined. He worked me very hard, taught me a tremendous work ethic. He told me, ‘You’re a young kid, you can achieve anything; have a goal and stick to it.’ Luck isn’t part of it; it’s hard work. You deal with setbacks and just move on. I have no formal education, and I became an executive vice-president [of grocery wholesaler Horne and Pitfield Foods] in a time when everybody else had an MBA or something, and I did it through the hard ranks. I left high school, went right into it. Got married young. My wife [Bev, his school sweetheart at Austin O’Brien High] was 18 and I was 19 and everyone said the marriage wouldn’t work and you’re crazy if you’re not going to university. But we had a young family to raise really quickly and all of a sudden, you know, you’re in it.”

Recalling the birth of the Running Room, he says, “I was making a very good salary in the food industry, and people thought I’d lost my senses, but I took our savings and we opened up several stores.”

Lessons learned in the grocery industry served him well.

“There were running stores around, but they were mainly set up by old-time runners who weren’t retailers. I was a retailer who became a runner. I think I was able to bring some marketing and customer service to it that was different. If you go into a Running Room anywhere in Canada, there’s a certain ambience—the store, the layout, what we do. Every Wednesday, every Sunday, there’s a group run no matter where you are.

“We look at the runner’s frame, do a gait analysis. We find out how much they’re running, what their goals are. Trail running? Asphalt running? Training to do a marathon or just running for fitness? We’ll get their shoes off and look at their foot strike and their foot structure. Then we’ll recommend three shoes to them, let them make up their minds. It could be a Nike, Reebok, New Balance shoe. We try to stay neutral on that.”

Not Too Fast, Not Too Slow

It’s hard to match Stanton’s passion for the product. When it comes to preaching fitness, he’s always “on.”

“A lot of people say they don’t have time for

exercise. I say, “You know, if you look at the most powerful job in the world, that’s probably the President of the United States. The Presidents of the United States all make time for exercise. Clinton ran, Gerald Ford ran, Jimmy Carter, both Bushes. I’ve said to people, ‘I know you’re busy, but if the President can make time for exercise, you can.’”

He does relax—sometimes. The Stantons have four grandchildren (“Now that’s really fun”) and a winter vacation house in Palm Springs, CA, close to golf and desert running.

Despite all the running, Stanton has avoided injury—and he says he knows why:

“I’m sure we each know people who were top athletes in high school who are limping around now because of their knees. They ran too hard. A lot of the people I ran with in the early days aren’t running any more because they didn’t learn the number one thing—and that is to slow down a little. If you slow down, you can enjoy your sport a lot longer.

“As runners we injure ourselves because of the high intensity of it. It’s not the distance; it’s because we want to go too fast, too far, too quickly. And the surface matters. If you can, run or walk on a nice packed-dirt trail in a park, or at least on asphalt versus concrete. I think my introduction of the walking and running combination helped. I call it my ‘ten and ones.’ When we start people in a running program, we have them run a minute, walk a minute. Week two we have them running two minutes,

walking one. At 10 weeks, they can run for 10 minutes, walk for one.”

As Canadians age, walking takes on new appeal. Stanton is bullish on that, too:

“The first sort of wave was the mall walker. Then the fitness walker. What we’re seeing now is the destination, the goal-setting walk-

He worries that technology has made us lazy and that childhood obesity is growing.

er. This weekend you’ll see tons of them walking the half or the whole marathon, or the five-K. They’re doing it, some of them, because they’re competitive, or because of a social cause, walking for a charity. Some of them, it’s just to have those bragging rights: ‘I walked the marathon.’ I call it their ‘horizontal Everest.’

“Again, don’t go too far, too fast, too quickly. But too much of a saunter, they’re not walking briskly enough. We try to get the walkers to pick up the pace. I tell them, ‘I want you to think, *I’m late for an appointment*, and you’ve gotta get there. By the time you arrive, you’ll notice your breathing—you’ll be a little sticky, but you’ve revved up your metabolism. We work on a gradual buildup like we do in a running program. As their performance increases, so does their sense of empowerment and their motivation.”

Stanton has no doubts that fitness can change your life:

“We start walking or running usually because we want to lose weight or we want to take control of something in our lives. It could be stress, it could be weight management, smoking, alcohol. It could be a traumatic event in your career or your family, maybe you had a divorce. And we start a program and it truly does become life-changing. We continue the program because of all the nice

people we meet, and, second, because of the empowerment it brings us. You just get to feeling more confident with yourself.”

The Athlete Inside Everybody

Stanton has been recognized for his work with awards for his management skills and for the Running Room’s contribution to the health of a nation. He is much involved in his local community and is proud to be an honorary colonel in the Loyal Edmonton Regiment. He can pack a lot into life and into an interview.

We talk about Dr. James Fixx, who sold over a million copies of 1977’s *The Complete Book of Running* but also had a family history of heart disease and dropped dead after a run, his arteries badly blocked by cholesterol. Stanton stresses that exercise is not enough—you must visit a doctor regularly, get your blood work done, know your family history. He worries that technology has made us lazy and that childhood obesity is growing. “It’s the biggest concern I have right now.” Does he shake his head at the “unconverted”?

“No,” he insists, “I just wish I could show them the joy and the empowerment that comes from exercise. I think there’s an athlete hidden inside of everybody that we can awaken. But people have to be awakened in different ways. Fear will do it. That did it for me, the realization that if I want to live with my family I better do something about my own fitness. For some people it could be stress levels that motivate them, others it will be vanity—just to look better.”

“I am a little bit of a zealot about fitness,” he grins, “there’s no doubt about it.”

He has a motto that guides him: “My definition of success is never knowing if you’re working or you’re playing, and I’ve achieved that.”

His confidence seems unshakeable. He is relentlessly positive. But doesn’t he ever have dark days like the rest of us?

“Sure,” he says. “I’ll have a big problem dumped on my plate and I’ll let that weigh on me a little bit. But generally I’ll go for a run, or a walk will do it. Often it provides the clarity of thinking to say ‘Gee, here’s the solution to it,’ or ‘I can’t do a darn thing about this...why am I worried about it? I’m going to enjoy my run!’” ■