



START

EM

YOUNG!

Former world-class runner  
**ROD DIXON** wants to end the  
childhood obesity epidemic

BY T.J. MURPHY

Photos by Christina Gandolfo

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ew Zealand's fiery yet affable Rod Dixon, one of the true greats of running, is long retired from professional racing, but his passion for running burns on. It now fuels the KiDSMARATHON Foundation, an operation that, over the past 10 years, has been installing in-school running programs for kids in the Los Angeles area, as well as in Nevada, Connecticut and in his native country.

Dixon's opponent these days is not John Walker, Steve Prefontaine or Geoff Smith — rather it's rush of nightmarish statistics: The doubling of childhood obesity rates over the past three decades.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported in 2010 one out of every three American children was obese, with 70 percent showing at least one risk factor for heart disease, and that the current childhood obesity numbers are what's driving projections that the numbers of the severely obese (people carrying 80 extra pounds) will rise by 130 percent in future years.

This, in turn, is what drives the animated, youthful 63-year-old Dixon to knock on school doors and search for open-minded teachers and administrators ("Often it's the runners and triathletes at the schools who get it first," he says) to recruit into coaching.

Take for example 10th Street Elementary School in central Los Angeles, where he sets up a running track of orange cones, 12 laps to the mile, on a blacktop surface protected by chain-link fences and barbed wire.

This past spring Dixon's Los Angeles program had 25,000 youngsters participating in the two-month program where kids log the miles that add up to a marathon of running, an accomplishment that earns them a medal and a T-shirt. Five thousand of the kids got to run their final mile at Dodger Stadium in late March.

Yet fighting obesity, both in the U.S. and increasingly in New Zealand and other parts of the world, is not what Dixon talks about most. It's the kids' grades.

Here's the thing: Although research has shown an indisputable correlation between daily activity and academic performance, the National Center for Education reports the average American child gets only 26 minutes of recess per day, with lower-income students getting the least. Why so low? School district cuts and policies like "No Child Left Behind" are routinely blamed, the emphasis on math and science laying sacrifice to art class, music class, PE, sports programs and recess.

"We are intent on improving academic performance. You don't do that by having kids hanging on the monkey bars," Benjamin O. Canada, superintendent of the Atlanta School District told the *New York Times*.

A childhood without physical activity: The stuff of Dixon's worst nightmares. Why not just put the kids in straight jackets and get it over with?



THE SUCCESS OF DIXON'S PROGRAM IS BUILT AROUND THE SIMPLE CONCEPT OF GETTING KIDS ACTIVE AND INSPIRED AT A YOUNG AGE.

"You'll drive them crazy," he says. "When I went to school we had an hour for lunch," Dixon remembers. "We had to sit and eat for 15 minutes. And then all hell broke loose, and we'd be running around and playing games for the rest of the time."

The decline in recess, sports and PE has unleashed a research backlash. In May, New Zealand's Institute of Medicine published a proclamation on the health and academic performance benefits of physical activity for kids. In addition to all the obesity warnings, the CDC reports the following benefits of physical activity for children: cerebral capillary growth, production of neurotrophins, growth of nerve cells in the hippocampus, brain tissue volume, neural network density, all equated to improved attention span, a better, faster memory and enhanced coping.

Dixon says he could have told you this more than 50 years ago. It was then he recalls days he got stumped in spelling.

"My teacher would give me a note and dispatch me to Room 5," he says. "I'd always run the long way to get there. When I got back, my brain was re-calibrated."

Dixon was born to run. It was 1968 in his hometown of Nelson when he and a few of the boys from the local athletics club were camped out next to a river, drinking beers and listening to the finals of the Olympic 1500-meter run from Mexico City on a transistor radio, the epic high-altitude battle that saw Kenyan Kip Keino upsetting the world record-holder, American Jim Ryun. After the

Photos by Christina Gandolfo

IT WASN'T UNTIL AFTER HE WON THE NEW YORK CITY MARATHON DID DIXON LEARN THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JUST FINISHING.

race, Dixon turned to his buddies and announced, "That's me you guys! I'm going to run in the Olympics." As Dixon recounted this story, his friends looked at him and said, "Mate, how many beers have you had?"

Dixon would make good on the bold declaration, building one of the more extraordinary careers in running history. The highlights spanned winning the Olympic bronze in the 1500 meters in 1972 in Munich to his remarkable come-from-behind 2:08:59 win at the 1983 NYC Marathon. The 11-year period fit neatly with the great vectoring arc of the recreational running boom.

Dixon says his initial spark was the day Sir Edmund Hillary, who, in 1953, teamed with Nepalese Sherpa Tenzing Norgay to be the first to scale Mount Everest, spoke at his elementary school.

"I was in awe," Dixon recalls, adding that Hillary encouraged the kids to dream big. "He said, 'When you dream what you can achieve with your life, Mount Everest isn't high enough. You can go beyond Mt. Everest.'"

The day sparkled in Dixon's memory. In 1973, while visiting friends in Auckland, he spoke about Hillary's talk.

"You should tell him the story," Dixon was encouraged. "He lives here in Auckland." Dixon looked him up. "His address was right there in the phone book. I still remember his phone number. So I just went over and knocked on his door." The awe that Dixon felt in 1960 had not diminished. The lanky figure appeared at the door and Dixon showed him the bronze medal.

"Fine, very fine," was the great climber's response and then, not being one for small talk, added, "What else?"

Dixon then told Hillary the story and that, "This medal was because of you."

"I want you to promise me one thing," Hillary replied, shaking his hand. "Inspire the next generation."

Another memory that helped galvanize the KiDSMARATHON occurred the day Dixon won the 1983 New York City

Marathon, in which he caught and passed Englishmen Geoff Smith in the final mile to win by 8 seconds.

"I won the race, I raised my arms and kissed the ground. Then there was all the media and interviews. I went and thanked Geoff Smith and drank champagne. About 2-1/2 hours after I finished I went back to the Tavern on the Green and watched."

Dixon was stunned into cheering. "All the runners who were finishing at 4-1/2 to 5 hours. They were just as excited to finish as I was to win it. They were hugging, high-fiving. I even saw some-one propose. I understood: it was a new world."

Dixon says it was then he came up with, "Winning is finishing and finishing is winning," his central message to the kids in his program.

"But the KiDSMARATHON is not just an event where you run around the block and get a medal. It's an 8- to 10-week program where the kids learn about how the tortoise beats the hare. You do your warm-ups and do your laps, and laugh and have fun. A few weeks in and they start seeing their times improve."

Their fitness and mental outlook improve, too. With the improvements comes the fire, Dixon says, and not just for the swift. "All the kids get the same race bib: Number 1, and they all get the same medal."

"Teachers are the most important people in my whole program," Dixon says. "After they've participated one year, they get the title of coach."

Mimi Gillen is a senior teacher at Washington Montessori School in New Preston, Conn., and has been involved with KiDSMARATHON for four years.

"My goal is to have each kid 'own' the program," says Gillen, who is also a runner. "I want them to use it for the rest of their lives. It has a calming and focusing effect. Running in the morning wakes up the neurological pathways and the children are more alert and ready to learn. The kids and parents know the benefits. On some occasions I have had kids say, 'I have a lot of work to do. I really need to get a run in today.'"

Dr. Jack Daniels, author of "Daniels' Running Formula" and one of the original coach/exercise physiologists, shares Dixon's reaction to the decline of recess, sports and PE.

"When I studied in Stockholm, I had a professor, Per-Olaf Åstrand,



ING KIDS ROCK

Part of the Rock 'n' Roll Marathon Series, this nationwide youth running program is aimed at helping kids develop sustainable healthy and active lifestyle habits. [Through four-, six- and eight-week training programs, kids can train with parents, teachers, coaches and friends to work toward the common goal of completing a total of 13 or 26 miles.](#) On race day, participants come together to complete their final mile on the course and become official ING KIDS ROCK finishers. All finishers receive a medal, T-shirt and goodie bag for their accomplishments, but the biggest prize is the ability to build healthy habits.

[www.ingkidsrock.comcompetitor.com](http://www.ingkidsrock.comcompetitor.com)

who said, "It's interesting: when kids are little all we do is encourage them to crawl, to walk and jump and play. But once they turn 6 all they hear is to sit down and shut up."

Daniels recalls as a child being turned loose to go play until dark. That still might happen, but now kids are often drawn to video games and other sedentary activities.

"But kids now don't do anything physical. Yet it's been proven that physical activity boosts mental activity. You function better. Just today I heard about a company donating a million dollars to a school so they could hire P.E. teachers. Is that what it's going to take?"

Rod Dixon's KIDSMARATHON isn't the only program making a difference. Others are beginning to spring up as a relatively low-cost solution to offset the lack of gym class, sports and recess. Fred Bailon has taught the third- and fourth-graders for 14 years and decided a year ago to start the Mile Strong Kids program in San Antonio, Texas.

"I've been a runner a long time," he says. "My dad always used to take me to the track." Bailon was inspired to start the club when he saw how much adults enjoyed lower-key events, like obstacle mud runs.

HILARY TOLD  
DIXON TO TRY  
TO INSPIRE THE  
NEXT GENERATION

"One of my students asked, 'How come there's nothing like that for kids?' Bailon worked with other teachers and put together a six-week running club. For each mile kids run they get a token, and for

every 12 miles logged, a pendant. The program culminates in a mud-run event.

"We wanted to make it fun." The Milestrongkids.org site features a hall of fame with photos of smiling children holding up their awards and wearing their T-shirts. "It's growing fast," Bailon says. "We just had 160 families show up, with around 300 kids participating."

Other successful programs include the ING Kids Rock program of the Rock 'n' Roll Marathon Series, Kids Run the Nation, Orange Laces Nation and Girls on the Run are growing in popularity and force. The 100-Mile Club is celebrating its 20th anniversary in 2013, Healthy Futures based out of Alaska and the Healthy Kids Running Series in five states nationwide.

Dixon believes things are starting to turn a corner. In Los Angeles county alone, he has 200 schools involved.

To which Dixon surely hears the Sir Edmund Hillary's words from 1973: "What's next?" **CM**

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► For more about youth running programs, go to [www.competitor.com/youth](http://www.competitor.com/youth)



KEYS TO GETTING  
KIDS RUNNING

**WHETHER YOU'RE A TEACHER, PARENT OR JUST A RUNNER, YOU CAN PLAY A ROLE IN BEATING THE CHILDHOOD OBESITY EPIDEMIC.**

**1 MAKE IT FUN.** Coach Jack Daniels says kids have to enjoy it. "In this country, running is often considered punishment. It's always, 'Make them run laps.' So kids associate running with being bad. One thing that's important about physical training is it better be fun, or they're not going to keep it up." The most important word when it comes to fitness? "Consistency," Daniels says.

**2 GET PARENTS INVOLVED.** "In some of the schools I've worked with in Los Angeles, the kids have never seen their parents exercise," Rod Dixon says. He insists on having the parents be part of the final mile his program. It's key to the kids' sense of accomplishment and also has the benefit of getting the parents into exercise. "The reason seat belt laws worked is because the kids kept nagging their parents about it," Dixon says.

**3 TALK NUTRITION.** Six weeks into the KIDSMARATHON program, a dietician gives a talk on food. "You hold up a tomato and some of these kids have no idea what it is," Dixon remarks. "When they think of food, they think of pizza." Daniels mentioned a rather terrifying number. "Do you know how much soda the average American consumes annually? Eighty gallons!" Hence, don't forget the talk about making good decisions about diet and nutrition.

**4 REWARDS.** "This is about being a runner for life," Dixon says. "There are no expectations on performance. There's no gold, silver or bronze medal. They all get the same medal for finishing." Incentives are a powerful force, adds Fred Bailon, a longtime runner and teacher in San Antonio. "It means a lot to kids. They love to get things. It doesn't cost much and it's such a powerful motivator."

Photo by Scott Draper