

A silhouette of a runner in mid-stride on a paved path in a park. The path is lined with trees and a stone wall. The ground is covered with fallen leaves. The background shows a landscape with trees and a cloudy sky.

365.2

GOING the DISTANCE

A Runner's Journey

Dr. Paul Semendinger

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**Going The Distance:
A Runner's Journey**



By

Dr. Paul Semendinger



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Beginning This Story At The End...

What follows is the true account of my successful attempt to run every single day for an entire calendar year.

As such, this is a chronicle of running, but it is also the story of a significant year in my life. It would be impossible to share my running journey without revealing who I am and my life experiences at the time that I completed this quest. As I ran, I also wrote striving to capture the feelings, emotions, and my thoughts in real time.

In keeping with the authenticity of this project, I did not go back and tie up all the loose ends. As part of the writing process, I revised and edited this work countless times, and while I worked to bring a sense of cohesion to the whole project, it is also true that life always moves in new directions—hopefully forward. But, in the end, life isn't always neat and clean. Things do not always work out as we hope or plan. There will always be loose ends that are not tied up at the end of a year... or ever. In keeping this work focused, I also had to leave out many stories, events, and the like. That, too, is in keeping with real life.

2022 was a watershed year for me. New doors opened and a big door closed. Throughout it all, I ran, and ran, and ran.

This account begins on January 1, 2022. I was 53-years-old and working as the principal of the most wonderful elementary school anywhere. This was a job I loved—deeply. I was also an adjunct college professor. A big change in my professional life was coming as, although I had not decided on that decision yet myself, this was the year I would retire as a principal.

I have always been very active. I try to exercise daily. As an athlete, for the most part, I'm nothing special. I never competed athletically in college. I wasn't even good enough to make a varsity sport in high school. But the one thing I do that most people do not, is run marathons. I found that sport in 2002 and it captured me. I continually look for the next marathon to run. I sometimes want to quit running long distances, but I can't.

In addition to running, I still play baseball. There is a large part

of me that never wants to grow up.

I have been happily married to my wife Laurie for over thirty years. We're all blessed that my parents and Laurie's parents are all still big parts of our lives. Laurie's brother, Mark, who has special needs, and who is my best friend, also plays a significant role in our lives. We have three wonderful sons: Ryan, Alex, and Ethan. Ryan married his wife Tiffany in 2021. When these people appear in the book, it helps to know who they are.

In certain instances, for confidentiality or for privacy, especially as it related to my professional career, I excluded certain events, or I wrote about some in very vague terms. In some situations, I have changed descriptors to make the individuals or situations discussed unrecognizable to others who might have knowledge of the people or situations I describe. I have also changed the names of some people to respect their privacy, for confidentiality, or otherwise.

As I ran and as I wrote, I realized how very fortunate I am. If there is something notable about me, it is the fact that I seem to have an iron will with great focus and tenacity. I believe in setting goals and working diligently to attain them. I believe in always pushing forward and seeking ways to accomplish new things.

When we strive for greatness, we often find out who we really are.

I believe in success, and I believe in failure.

I often read books and am inspired by the successes, great and small, that others have achieved. It is my hope that this story, this account of my daily running, and my life in 2022, helps to motivate others to set their own goals and to work to live out their own dreams.

We can all do more than we ever thought was possible.

All it takes is taking that very first step...

An Important Note:

THIS IS NOT A BOOK ABOUT RUNNING.

This is the story of a runner (me) as I live through my year of running on a daily basis. Running each day for an entire year was my white whale, one of the things I had to do in my life.

I wrote this book to inspire runners to set their own goals and to work to achieve them. But running is a metaphor. We all have goals, hopes, ambitions, and dreams. Not everyone runs. Not everyone wants to run. Still, we all have dreams. It's my hope that this book helps others to live out their dreams.

This could have just as easily been a book about my attempt to play the piano every day or to read the Bible over the course of a calendar year. This could be the story of a person seeking to read many books or paint his first portrait. Or anything...

People set all sorts of goals. And goals are great. But it's one thing to set a goal and another to find the ways to achieve it. I hope, as I found the ways to achieve this goal, that it can motivate you (the reader) to find ways to achieve yours.

We also don't set goals on a daily basis, but instead we set them over time. There really is no true starting point, nor should there ever be an end to our lifelong quests to achieve.

The Rule of 10,000 basically says that in order to be great at something, a person must spend 10,000 hours at that task. Once a person reaches that mark, he or she could be considered a virtuoso. I've been running for decades, and have covered more than 25,000 miles to date. I figure that's about 5,000 hours of running (probably a bit less). As a runner, I'm about halfway to being a virtuoso.

But, again, it's not about the end. Once I reach 10,000 hours of running, I'll work to reach 10,000 more. Once I accomplish one goal, I set out to do more. It's a lifetime quest to be better in everything I do. And I have a long way to go.

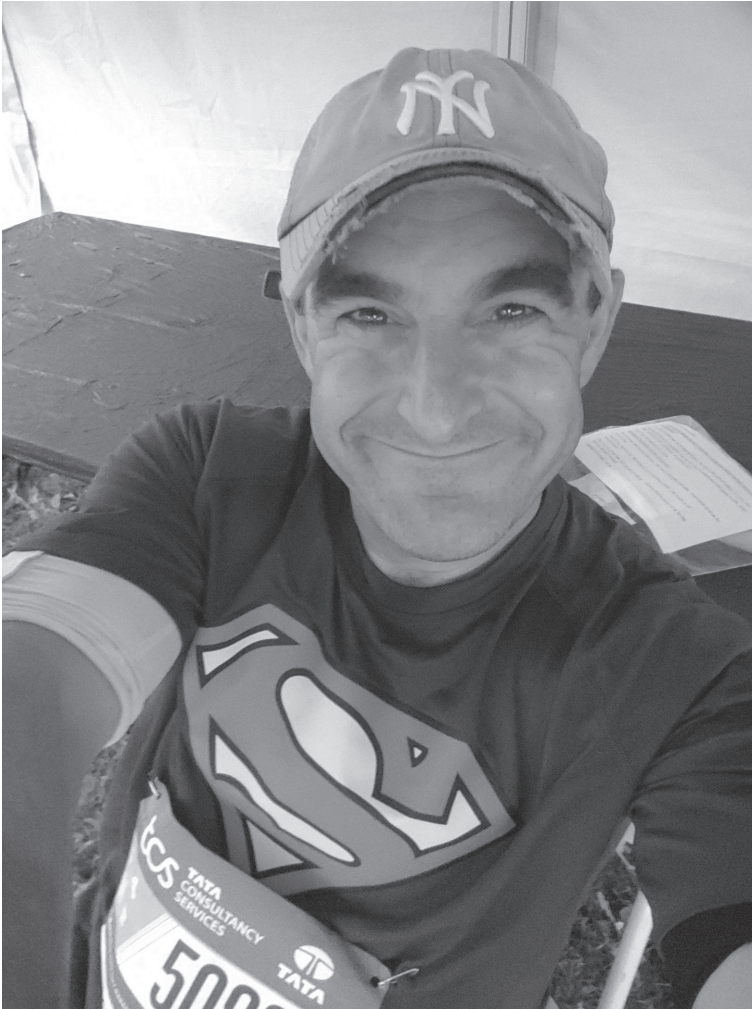
I stumble a lot. I fail a lot. I figure I've spent more than 10,000 hours failing at things. I'm sure I'm a virtuoso at failing.

But, if that's so, I'm also a virtuoso at getting back up and start-

ing again.

That's what I hope the reader gets from this book – the idea that if I can run every day for a year, then you can also certainly do something amazing. You might set out to run every day for two years. Or five. It doesn't matter. At all. I hope everyone surpasses my accomplishment and achieves all they set out to do.

It's all about always moving forward. One day at a time.



JANUARY

"Bid me run, and I will strive with things impossible."

William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*

Saturday, January 1, 2022

Day 1 – 5.1 miles

As I begin this significant journey and somewhat ridiculous quest, I look forward to the challenge of daily running with both anticipation and dread. I want to do this. More, I *need* to do this. Running every day for a year has been a compulsion of mine for at least a decade, probably longer. I often think of things I wish to accomplish. Some are big things and some small – some meaningless and others important. There is something essential in life about setting goals, no matter how meaningless they might seem at first. I have often wondered if I could run every single day for an entire year. I also don't think this is meaningless. This is something I think I need to do.

And to do it there's only one starting point. Today. The first day of the year.

I am somewhat afraid to begin. I know this will be very difficult. I know there will be days when I dread running. I have a pretty strong feeling that I'll hurt myself. I don't want that. I also know that once I get too far into this, I will not be able to stop. This could become all-consuming. I'm not looking forward to any of that. But I have to give this a try. If I don't, I will think about this all year and resolve on the first day next year to undertake this challenge. If I don't begin today, I will be feeling these same emotions at this time next year. The only difference is that another year will have passed, and I will

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be that much older. I'm getting to the point where I am not sure how many years I have left where I can consider doing something like this. I'm approaching my mid-fifties when most people slow down. The clock is ticking. In many ways, for me, it's now... or never.

The fact that I have not attained this life goal frustrates me because I am tired of thinking about this challenge, starting this task, and not following through by being unable to complete it. In this regard, I'm tired of feeling like a failure. If I set a goal for myself and I fail to attain that goal, to me, that's failure. I don't like to fail. I know that running every single day will be difficult for many reasons. But in a different sense it's also very difficult to keep putting off a goal. On January 1 next year I want to look back knowing that I faced a monumental physical challenge and succeeded in overcoming it.

I will never forgive myself if I don't complete this task. One of these years I'm going to run every single day. It might as well be this year.

I am excited to begin. I am also overwhelmed with the thought of the task ahead of me. I am fearful, but I am full of anticipation.

Life is made up of contradictions.

They say the third time is the charm. I hope it is. I have attempted this task twice before and failed both times. I don't like to fail. When I fall short of my goals, when I quit, I see weakness in myself. I would like to think that I am stronger than any and all of the circumstances that surround me. But that's not always true.

The first time I tried to run every day for an entire year was in 2017. It didn't go well. I made it to January 4. Big deal. After running for just three days that year, I had had enough. I couldn't sustain the motivation needed to run every day. I think, deep down, I was afraid of committing too much to the ordeal that was to come. I stopped because I was afraid. I quit on myself. I failed.

The next time I tried was the very next year. I did better that time. I made it to February 23 for a total of 53 consecutive days of running.

That was no small feat. But, to be honest, I hated it. My heart wasn't totally in it. Rather than being something great, it was one more thing I had to do. I tried to find the easy way out far too often by running as little as possible. I was getting there, but it wasn't authentic and because of that, I ultimately failed.

This year is different. I am tired of thinking about doing this. I need to get it done. This time I have the focus and the correct frame of mind. I am mentally and physically ready for this challenge.

I appreciate running more today than I did even a few years ago. In 2017 and 2018, my body was slowly breaking down. I had an assortment of injuries, many that runners typically face at one time or another, but as I was getting older, into my fifties, the injuries weren't getting better. I had one particular injury, one that I kept running through, that was a ticking time bomb. I had tears in my right Achilles tendon. Each time I ran, I made the tears worse. I gutted through the pain for years, but it eventually got in the way of me being able to be the athlete and the runner I need to be. I finally had surgery in January 2020 to repair my Achilles tendon.

Once I could finally run again, after shedding the crutches, the walking boot, and after going through months of painful physical therapy, I resolved to appreciate the sport of running more. The months of not being able to run helped me to develop a new appreciation for this activity.

I also learned how difficult it is to start anew. I knew it would take time, perseverance, and a great deal of patience to become a runner again. I also still wanted to be able to run marathons. I knew there would be pain. Running hurts. It just does. And when one starts running, it hurts even more. Running is difficult. It is often not fun. As I started running, I learned again why people hate this sport. But I was determined to find a way to love running once again.

I'm getting older. But I'm also too young to quit being vigorous. When I am active, I feel more alive.

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To kick off my year of running, I had considered taking part in a local race, the First Day 5K in Fair Lawn, New Jersey, but it was raining, so I decided to go to my steady and loyal stand-by, my treadmill. I run a lot on my treadmill.

I wanted to begin 2022 with a good solid run. My goal was to reach five miles. I set a simple formula:

Mile 1 at 6.0 miles per hour.

Mile 2 at 6.1 miles per hour.

Mile 3 at 6.2 mph

Mile 4 at 6.3 mph and

Mile 5 at 6.4 mph

It was a struggle, but I did it. Big tasks are often easier when they are broken down into smaller segments.

I usually do a little “cool down” after the run is completed. Most often this adds an extra tenth of a mile to my total miles covered for the day. While I ran five miles, with the cool down, I actually covered 5.10 miles.

I have one day down. There are 364 to go.

Sunday, January 2, 2022

Day 2 – 2.1 miles

One of the first things I needed to determine as I embarked on this journey was to decide what actually counts as a day of running. To answer this, I researched “streakers” (that’s what they’re called—people who run every day) and the common answer seems to be just one mile. That simple fact makes this long unrelenting goal seem a little bit more attainable. I think I can run one mile a day. One little mile seems reasonable.

(Is reasonable even a fair adjective for running every day for a calendar year?)

I usually run first thing in the morning, but I wasn't able to get to my run today until 8:30 p.m.

I began today by walking with a friend, Mike. We have been walking together for years and have a three-mile route that we cover together once each week. I enjoy our weekly walks, but they don't count as runs. Walking isn't running. So, while we covered some miles, I still had to find the time to run.

After the walk, Ethan and I went to the Jets game to watch Ethan's favorite football player, the great Tom Brady. This might be Brady's last year in the NFL, and this was the only time his team, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, would be in town.

It was a fantastic game. In the end, Tom Brady marched his team 90 yards in the final two minutes to secure the victory. Last season Tom Brady led his team to a Super Bowl victory. It was the seventh time he's been a Super Bowl winning quarterback. He might just do it again this year. There are rumors that if he wins it all again, that he will retire. I always like to see great players go out on top. In my professional life, that's what I plan to do. I also want to go out on top.

When we returned home, I didn't have the ability to immediately run. All day long, even at the game, I was answering e-mails and texts on my phone.

We will be returning to school, full time, tomorrow for the first time since we shut down for Covid in 2020. We're returning just as Covid cases are spiking. As a principal, I pride myself on being available for the parents at all times. I can't think of a better way to demonstrate my commitment and my dedication to the school and the community. Many people think I'm crazy, but I give my phone number to the parents each year at Back-to-School Night. I tell them, "If you need me, I'm available."

When we love what we do, we give it everything we have. This is how I run my school and how I live my life. I try not to take short-cuts. If it is worth doing, it's worth doing well.

Because this is all so unprecedented, returning to fulltime school, establishing new procedures and safeguards, and so much more, in the midst of a pandemic, there are a lot of questions being asked by everyone: the district leaders, the school principals, the teachers, the parents, and the community. There is a lot of fear right now. Last night the elementary principals in my district (there are six of us) had a virtual meeting to establish some parameters for the return to school tomorrow. We have discussed all of this for weeks, but things are always changing.

This is now the third consecutive school year impacted by Covid, and still so much is new, uncertain, and (quite frankly) unknown. Much of the time, we are dealing with questions that no one knows the answers to. Many of the questions don't even have any answers. That's what makes so much of this so challenging. The rules change. The approaches change.

The other principals and I make a great team, but we don't agree on everything. We all bring different strengths to our schools, and we run our schools very differently. It becomes extremely challenging to find approaches that work for all our schools as we address situations we never before had to solve. We care deeply about what we do, and we are doing everything we can to keep everyone safe, and to have schools where learning takes place, and students are cared for in a time of angst, worry, and great confusion.

It's only the second day of the year, but, after such a long day, I thought about taking the easy way out and only running one mile on my treadmill. "I just need to keep the streak alive today," I rationalized. But as I ran, I felt good, and pushed to reach two miles knowing that in less than 12 hours I'll be running again.

Monday, January 3, 2022

Day 3 – 3.1 miles

On most workdays, I get up at about 4:00 a.m. as I did today.

Some people linger in bed when the alarm clock rings. I don't. I usually wake naturally before the alarm, but if it does ring, I quickly turn it off and immediately get going. I can't lie in bed waiting for the day to catch me. I always need to be ahead of the day. This is who I am. I began waking up super early during my doctoral work. I wanted to be available to be a daddy and husband. The only time when I could work without taking away from my family was when they were all sleeping. This approach became my habit. I am motivated to succeed in all I do, even more, I am determined to succeed. I can only get there by getting up and getting started.

I begin my days by checking my e-mail. Today I received the following message:

Happy New Year! Just wanted to reach out and let you know that after a lot of consideration, we have decided to keep our daughter home this week. With a young baby at home, we're trying the best we can to manage our risk and want to keep her home until the new covid case metric starts to normalize. We will reassess at the end of the week. I'm sure balancing all of this as an educator is very difficult, but if there is any way we can help her keep up with her school work this week, please let us know.

This is a perfect an example of what we're facing in schools right now. The fear and trepidation are real. Parents are scared. Teachers are scared. This has to have an impact, and not a positive one, on our students.

It can't be good for kids to grow up in a world of frightened adults.

When I grew up, the adults all seemed fearless. That gave me great comfort because as a child I was scared of a lot.

This morning, I banged out a fast three-miles on the treadmill. If I can run at under 9-minute-mile pace, that's fast for me. I wanted to run further, but I know I have to run again tomorrow and since I just started this whole every day running thing, I'm trying to be

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somewhat smart about all of this. I don't want to overdo a run and burn myself out, or, worse yet, get injured.

After the run, as I do on most mornings, I soaked for a few minutes in my hot tub outside. I do this as often as I can. This time alone outside is where I can find some true peace and solace. I sometimes use this time to pray, but today I simply sat in the hot bubbling water and relaxed.

Tuesday, January 4, 2022

Day 4 – 4.1 miles

I wanted to run a little longer today, but I didn't have the energy or the focus (and both are essential) to having a successful run. There are times when I cut a run short because I don't have the stamina, but just as often, if I stop short of my goal, it is because I cannot maintain the focus needed to keep going.

My mind is always racing, thinking of all the things I am responsible for. I often use my runs as a distraction from everything else, but sometimes I can't put my work out of my mind, and as a result, the run becomes something that gets in the way. Once that happens, once the stresses of my job enter into mind, my run is doomed.

This is one reason I wake up so early each morning. It is the only way for me to make the time needed for exercise while still being able to accomplish everything else I need to do.

I feel proud of myself when I run long distances. The long run indicates to me that I am strong and vibrant. These are feelings I crave and ones that keep me going. Unfortunately, these feelings never last very long, and I feel the need to challenge myself daily.

One of my biggest fans called me yesterday to request an autographed copy of *The Least Among Them*, my book that provides a very unique history of the New York Yankees. She wanted a signed copy to give to a friend. I dropped off the book on my way to work.

That big fan is my mom.

The return to school yesterday went very well. The kids and the teachers all seemed happy and relieved to be back and at school in person. No one wants to go back to on-line learning. And there is this overarching fear that the schools may be closed again at any moment. I get asked about this multiple times each day. "Do you think we'll be closing?" For now, the answer is no.

I am fearful that our schools could be closed, and not necessarily because of sickness, but because we might run out of teachers who can report to work. Yesterday we had numerous teachers out not because they were sick, but because of the rules regarding close contacts. It looks like tomorrow we will have more teachers out.

I spent my morning plugging holes and finding unique ways to run the school in the absence of so many teachers. Part of the problem is that we do not have enough substitute teachers. Most of our substitute teachers are older people, and many older people are not willing to come into the schools right now. This could become unsustainable in a hurry.

One local school had 17 teachers out today. That is my fear. How do you run a school with no teachers?

My school had only three teachers out. For whatever reason my school seems, continually, to have the lowest number of Covid cases in the district and the best teacher attendance.

Whatever we are all doing in my school, we seem to be doing it right.

Or we've just been very lucky.

Wednesday, January 5, 2022

Day 5 – 3.1 miles

Before I go any further, I need to introduce a key supporting ac-



tor in this journey—my NordicTrack Elite 9700 Pro treadmill, or as I call it, “the TM.” A great deal of my running takes place on the TM. I have had this model since September 2011. I have run thousands of miles on this machine.

If I get injured this year, my quest to run each day will come to an end. If the TM breaks, the same could possibly happen.

I run on the treadmill when it’s too cold outside. I use it when it’s snowing or raining. I sometimes run inside when it’s too hot. I most often run in the early morning when it’s still dark outside

and that’s a big reason why I’m on the TM so often.

I don’t like running outside in the dark. There are far too many dangers outside in the early morning: cars, delivery trucks, dogs, raccoons, skunks, potholes, sticks... any number of things. In the winter, ice is always an issue.

I’m not afraid of the dark, but when it comes to running outside before daylight, I am a little afraid. I much prefer running where it is safe—at home on the TM.

Thursday, January 6, 2022

Day 6 – 4.1 miles

This morning’s run was tedious. I usually vary my pace to generate

some interest and variety in what I'm doing, but today I stayed at 6.0 MPH and just ran, albeit a little slower than I would have preferred.

I am trying to pace myself a bit, not quite knowing, yet, how to conceptualize what it is to run every single day for an entire year. Because of this, I am trying to make smart decisions such as how I handled today's run. On days like today, I am simply trying to get the run in. I'm not trying to run fast. I'm just striving to run.

Thus far, even as the school deals with teacher shortages, we're making it work. The teachers, when necessary, are covering for each other—and even for the principal.

Yesterday there was so much ice on the roads that I couldn't make it to work on time. For whatever reason, our town wasn't prepared for the ice. They never put salt or anything down and the roads were far too slick. That's never happened to me before. Cars were sliding everywhere. My commute is only six miles, but much of it is downhill. Yesterday, in just the first few minutes of driving, I realized that there was no way I could manage the hills safely. I turned around and went back home until the roads got better.

In my absence, or, more accurately, in my delay in getting to work, the teachers and the secretaries did all the things I would have. They covered for me. That's the mark of a special school.

Friday, January 7, 2022

Day 7 – 3.1 miles

We actually have a snow day today. The snow was coming down heavy overnight. In our area, snow days are called when it seems the snow will be deep enough (a few inches at least) or the roads bad enough (yesterday was a huge exception) to make driving hazardous. This decision is made by the superintendent of each school district so there are times when one town has school and the town right next door does not. It's an interesting dynamic to say the least. For whatever reason, days like today seem like a bonus—a special

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gift. These are free days, in a sense, to do whatever we wish.

Of course, I'll spend a lot of time clearing my driveway and then my in-laws' driveway of the snow.

I only reached three miles today. I'm already getting tired of running on the treadmill day after day. I wanted to run further, but I again did not have the focus to keep going. I'm a little down about this because before I started running today, I was sure I had a little more in me.

I should probably take solace in the fact that I have now run every day for an entire week. But then again, I have 51 more weeks to go.

Saturday, January 8, 2022

Day 8 – 3.1 miles

Today another great friend, Colin, joined Mike and me on our walk. Our sons were all in Boy Scouts together and we all served as leaders in various capacities. Good people bring out the best in me and these are two of the best people I know.

One of the best school leaders I ever worked for was the principal of Pompton Lakes High School when I was just beginning my career as an administrator. I learned a great deal from him. He taught me to always hire people better than myself. He shared that effective leaders bring in people who challenge them. It is through challenges that good leaders become great.

At some point, we all want to be told how great we are, but I have found that the strongest leaders value opposing viewpoints. I have worked for some excellent leaders who value deep thought, reason, and open dialogue. These people brought out the best in me.

I have also worked for some leaders who were less than effective and who hated to be challenged. I once worked for a boss who threatened to give me a written reprimand because in a private conversation with that person, I offered a vision different than what