

# RUNNER'S WORLD

Motivation :Runners' Stories

I'm a Runner: Dick Bavetta

This Wall Street tycoon, turned NBA referee, started running because he had to, but learned he loved it and started running because he wanted to.



By Sarah Lorge Butler

During a game I run six to eight miles. To prepare, I run every day, even game days. I go out about 6:30 a.m. and do eight miles. I'm not setting any land-speed records--I do 10-minute miles--but I feel better and healthier as a result.

On February 8, 2006, I refereed my 2,135th game, an NBA record. I've never missed a game, either (2,219 games at press time). I attribute that to off-season training and running every day.

I wear five pairs of socks, too. I used to wear two or three, but my feet were getting sore from running. So I added two more. It gives me a half-size bigger shoe: New Balance in 2E width.

When I was hired in 1975, most refs got in shape in the preseason. Then the NBA required us to run a mile and a half at training camp. To get an excellent grade, I had to do it in 10:30.

I was down to 11:15 by September. Then, just prior to camp, I got to 10:45. Finally, at camp, I did 10:27. The euphoria of reaching that goal has yet to be matched.

At times there is a focus on how physical an official's job is. That pushes me to work harder. I don't want someone to say, "Gee, he's not bad for a 67-year-old."

Last year Miami's Dwyane Wade disputed a call another ref made. I told him, "I didn't get a good look at it." He said, "Dick, don't use that as an excuse. You're in the best shape of anyone."

Often when I'm running in an NBA city, I'll hear a car horn and "Yo, Dick, keep it going!" Once, I was going along Route 9--near where the New Jersey Nets play--and a state trooper pulled me over. I said, "Officer, was I going too fast?" He laughed, then told me to be careful.

During the off-season, I live in a cabin in Lake George, New York.

In the morning I bike for an hour, then row an old rowboat for an hour or so. I relax until 3:30, then do my eight miles.

The downside to all this is that I'm in my jammies by 7.

I raced [former NBA player] Charles Barkley during this year's All-Star weekend; we raised \$50,000 for charity. I found out very quickly that I'm not a sprinter. We went up and down the court three times. Then I said, "All right, I'm ready." They told me, "Dick, it's over. You lost."

After the season, I take one day off running, so there's a separation, psychologically, from the season coming up. I go to Baskin-Robbins and get a double-dip ice-cream cone with sprinkles. I go crazy.

And he says, "By the chart?" And I said, "The chart says that's good." And he says, "Well, that's not good enough." I said, "Why not?" He said, "Are they going to publish this?" I said, "I'm sure." Maybe go into my personnel file. He said, "You can get in enough trouble with blocks and charges during the game. You miss enough calls during the game to get yourself in trouble, and you can't control that. This is something you can control. So we need to do the best we can to get you to 10:30 or less." I said, "That's easy for you to say."

There was a high school in Brooklyn that had an outdoor track and I used to go over every day and run around the track. And probably, just prior to training camp, I got it to 10:45. And he said, "Kick it in the last lap." The bottom line is, when the time came at camp, I did it in 10:27.

The euphoria of accomplishing a goal has yet to be matched. It's just a great feeling. And the fact that it was a posted thing as being excellent for my age, and everyone on the NBA staff saw this. After about seven or eight years, the best time I ever did was 9:59. For me, that was big time. I just wanted to break the 10-minute barrier. I was almost 50 years old. Some of these young guys were cruising.

After a few years, we made such fun out of it. Based on the previous times from the previous years, that's how we set up different races. We didn't have 60 guys running all at once. The last race of the day was all these young guys. We made such fun out of it- we'd give t-shirts out. As time went by, it just evolved to where everybody was coming to camp and everybody was getting excellents. The NBA said, "Let's do it one year without having to mandate to these guys."

### **So did you keep running when it was no longer mandated?**

I'm from a different generation. In 1988 we went to three officials, so we expanded our staff from 35 to 60. We needed younger people; they came in in better shape. I was probably the first in 1983 to start an off-season training program. I started to see the need to, rather than wait until July every year, to try to turn the light switch on and off which isn't so easy to do as you get older, that I would now start to do this on a regular basis on my off days when I came home from a trip. That evolved into the '90s. Probably 1990, 1991. I started to now run during the season. I would run on my off days during the season.

Over a period of time, people would ask me how many miles I run in a game, I would answer between six and eight. It always seemed to be that figure. I had that on my mind and I said, I wonder how long it would take me to do 8 miles. Then I thought, if I'm doing that during a game, why not be prepared for that in the off-season? So I just came up with this magical figure in my mind, and that's the furthest distance I've ever done. I probably do like 10-minute miles, one hour, 20 minutes. That's sufficient for me. The thing that keeps me going is that my regimentation is I do it every day. Even on game days. That started, I would say six years ago.

### **Did you find it took a lot out of you?**

No. I found it to be invigorating. It was amazing. With the emphasis just on off-season training and just staying in shape, things like that, as I was getting older, it became more difficult to take a day or two off. If I had back-to-back games, I didn't feel as healthy. By taking two days off running, even though I was referring games, I just didn't feel as physically fit, felt a little sluggish. It's kind of like an oxymoron that I'm actually running on game days. I run about 6:30 or 7 in the morning, then have my breakfast. Then have lunch. Then power naps. I take these power naps in the afternoon from 1:30 to 4:30. I experimented with running every day, including the day of the game. I have felt better and healthier as a result of that.

What's really interesting, I think, on Feb. 8, 2006, I referred my 2,135th consecutive game. I've never missed a game in 31 years. I truly attribute that to the off-season training, the

running every day. And everybody makes fun of me, but the one thing I do that no one else does, I wear five pairs of socks.

### **Five pairs? Did I hear you right?**

Five pairs of socks. I just found that when I run it gives cushioning to my feet. Just regular sweat socks. No special socks. It gives me a half size bigger [shoe]. I wear these New Balance. I love New Balance. They have the 2E width. New Balance has made my feet happy feet.

My feet were getting sore from the running. I notice the players in the NBA games tape their ankles. Some of the younger referees were complaining about their knees bothering them, their ankles. So during the summer, I said, let me just experiment, add a couple of pairs of socks. I always used to wear two or three anyway. So I just added two more pairs of socks. Felt comfortable with five. Wasn't too restrictive to my feet. Went to a half size bigger. I said, as long as I'm not missing games. Might be missing calls, but I'm not missing games, I'm going to stick with this. So it's been a comfortable existence for me and a healthy existence for me.

### **What do you wear during the games?**

They have a New Balance referee shoe. All black. I go two pair a year.

### **So you're running 56 miles a week, not including games! You could run a marathon!**

Now, the downside to it all is that I'm in my pajamas at 7 at night. During the summer, I have little mountain bike, I go off in the woods in the morning, and I ride that for about an hour. About quarter to 11 I go down to the lake, there's an old wooden rowboat. I row that for about an hour and a half. That gets me back here about 12:15. I relax until 3:30. Do my eight miles until about 5. Have a little dinner, put my jammies on. I only do that during the summer, July and August.

During the season, my season is so hectic. I'm on call all the time. During the summer, there's a little leeway. I like to get up here, I really feel the presence of my mother and father. It's very peaceful. I don't feel as if I'm infringed upon when I run. Look up at the sky, look up at the trees. It's healthy. My motivation is the fact that I know that starting in October, I know I'll be back to basketball again. I ended last season with 2,164 games. I will do about 12 to 15 games a month. I do about 82 games a season. The streak only included regular-season games. I've done well over 200 playoff games. So weather, nothing, has kept me from a game. My streak is consecutive. I don't think there's anyone within 1,500 games. I never really thought of it until February of 2004, when I refereed my 2,000th game. In asking me about 2,000, people asked me about the record. It kind of called attention to it.

### **How do you know you do six to eight miles a game?**

Some years ago, they put some little whatever-you-call-those-things that register the miles that you run on someone's foot, and they figured it out. I'm just taking that as Gospel. That's why I say six to eight, to allow for a little wiggle room, in case the guy was cutting off the corners.

### **Does this put you in better shape than most of the players?**

I don't know if I'd say that. These guys, most of them are 40 to 45 years younger than me. I do remember last year, during the playoffs, a game in Detroit, I had Miami-Detroit. Detroit comes down and shoots, it was a long rebound, and they start up court very quickly, long pass. Dwyane Wade catches the ball, and he goes up. I'm on the opposite end, I'm running hard, I'm in the trail position, still in the backcourt, I'm running as fast as I can. And it looks like the shot is blocked, the ball goes out of bounds, he reacts and says something to the other referee. Now there's a timeout. After the timeout he walks over to me and says, "Dick, I was fouled on that play." I said, "Dwyane, from where I was, it looked like a great block." And I'm in the backcourt on the opposite side of the court. I said, "I don't even really get a good look at this. I'm working hard." He said, "Dick, don't give me that as an excuse. You and I

both know that you're the best-shaped referee on the staff. I don't care how old you are or what you say, you're in the best shape of anybody."

So whether he was just saying that or not, I don't know. But that's one of my trademarks as well. I'm the working-class guy. I go out, I work hard, I hustle as best I can-and that's not to say that other referees don't do that too. But that's certainly my trademark, to just work hard.

### **Do the players know about the running you do?**

I would say so, because of the articles over the years. With my 2,135th game-there were a lot of questions, what do you attribute the streak to? I just say, staying in shape as best I can during the season. I got a phone call from the NBA the night before, Feb. 7, the record-setting game. They want to send a film crew with you. They come over that night, Tuesday night. They say, "Your game tomorrow, we're going to have a film crew in the car with you, going to the game, going into the locker room." They miked me and filmed me during the course of the game, things like that. They said, "What's the typical day for you?" I said, "Tomorrow morning I'll run, then I'll have breakfast." They said, "Oh, OK, Can we be a part of that?" I said, "Absolutely." They said, "What time do you want us here?" I said, "You can get here anytime you want, I'll be running at 6:30."

They all looked at each other and said, "Tomorrow morning? Dick, it's 35 degrees out." I said, "Guys, I'm running. You want to be here? Be here."

Sure enough, I get to the lobby, and I don't see anybody around. As I start out, the camera crew is in the car getting warm. And they had a guy with a camera following me, all bundled up. They filmed this for part of this special that they did on me. It was really terrific. When people saw this as part of the special, they said, "God bless you, Dick Bavetta. 6:30 in the morning? Come on." In fact, it was still dark out. They saw me running through the parking lot of Newark Airport, which is where the hotel is that we stay at. I've run there many, many times.

### **Have you ever had any problems running there?**

No, because when I run, I run through the parking lot for a while, and then I go into the garage and run up and down the ramps. And then I end up going out onto route 9; it's a major highway. That's why I run early, I can avoid traffic.

One time I'm running, going along the soft shoulder of 9 south and I hear "whoop whoop whoop." I see the flashing lights of a state trooper car. I go off to the side, I'm thinking he's going by me, and he pulls me over. He calls me to the car. He says, "Are you OK?" I said, "Officer, am I going too fast?"

He starts to laugh. He says, "No, on the contrary. Just be careful, make sure you stay off on the side of the road." I try to stay off the beaten path. When I'm in San Francisco, there's a path along San Francisco bay. In Phoenix, I go up into the mountains a little bit.

### **Do you ever do any races?**

No, only at camp. There are 62 of us refs. What's really interesting is that before the game, we have access to the trainers of the home team. They always come in and see me and laugh. "Anyone want any ice packs after the games? Hydrocollators? Dick?" I say, "Just check with the young guys." They make fun of me with my five pairs of socks. All I do is stretching. I say, "Listen, while you guys were snuggly in your beds this morning, I was out doing my eight miles, so don't give me any baloney about that."

### **Do you ever just have the urge to blow it off?**

Over the years, I've found that I run today to make it easier for tomorrow. I really believe that. At times I've thought about it. Maybe I get in late to a city or something like that and I don't run in a day and I have a game the next day. In the morning I'll get up and there's a lethargy that comes about because I didn't run the day before. I find myself thinking that if I don't run

today, it's that much tougher tomorrow. I work today for tomorrow, and I've always just done that.

### **How long will you referee?**

I'll tell you, if my career ended today, it's been wonderful. No one's ever done 31 years. I've done the most games. It's still fun. Because of my age, 67, I think there are times when there is a focus on the physicalness as to what I do. That just gives me the incentive to work harder to make sure there is no slippage. I don't want someone to say, "Gee, he's not bad for a 66-year-old." I want to be considered on the same level as everyone else. I've been blessed. I've worked the Finals, which is the epitome of what we strive for, the last 20 years. So as far as I'm concerned, I don't have a timetable. I take my physical on Oct. 1 every year. And if God is good to me, which he always is, and I pass it, I'll go for year number 32. I don't really think more [far ahead] than that. Like I said, it's still fun for me. I still feel as if I'm celebrating my 16th birthday.

### **Do you ever get recognized when you run?**

Up here at Lake George, I have to cross a highway to get another part of the Adirondacks. I'm always on the same time schedule, between 3 and 3:30 every day. People will blow horns. For whatever the reason, especially on the back roads here, some of the neighbors I haven't seen since last summer, they pull up alongside and want to talk. This is a dirt road in some spots, it's got divots, and rocks. I don't want to look off to see who I'm talking to. Last time I did that, I stepped in a hole. I just keep on waving them through. Then I'll see someone in town in a couple days, and they say, "Geez, Dick." I say, "Do me a favor, and don't be offended. When I run, I run. I don't look into a car to see who I'm talking to. The last time I did that, I fell into a ravine."

### **How about in NBA cities, are you recognized there?**

In NBA cities, I hear a horn go and, "Yo, Dick, keep it going!" Something like that. I have no idea who it is. Certainly the people in the hotels, as I'm coming in and out of the lobby at 6:30 in the morning. "Hi, Mr. Bavetta, How are you doing?" Just general comments, people are very respectful. At some of the hotels, they know I'm coming back at a certain time, and they'll have some bottled water for me at the front desk. Everyone chuckles. It's usually the overweight bellman who says, "Yeah, I did mine earlier today!"

### **Do you listen to an iPod or anything?**

No, I guess growing up in Brooklyn, the one thing I never did was put the headphones on. I was always afraid of getting hit by a taxicab or a bus or someone blowing a horn coming through an intersection. I want to be able to hear everything.

### **Do you find the time passes pretty easily?**

Yes! What's great about my running is the NBA can't get me. There are no cell phones, there's no laptop, there's no crowd. I can think about previous games, think about that night's game coming up. Who's playing, what the records are. Then we have morning meetings the day of a game. And the running in the morning the day of a game helps me prepare for what I'm going to discuss with my two fellow officials. I don't walk into the meeting unprepared.

### **Can you describe what the pressure's like, the pressure of 20,000 people yelling at you? Are you impervious to it at this point?**

I would think that's a great word. I am impervious to it. After so many years, it's like I don't even hear outside the measurements of the court. I certainly hear what players and coaches say. With them, I have found myself to be a good listener. Sometimes players and coaches need to vent. That has made me a better official. I listen to what they say. Sometimes a nod of the head is all they're looking for. As far as the fans, they pay good money to be sitting all around and booing and doing whatever they want to do. They usually don't get any sort of reaction from me.

### **Ever had any running injuries?**

No, I've been very blessed. The five pairs of socks give me more cushioning. I'm not setting any land speed records. The regimen of running every day keeps me in shape. No, I can't even think of any time I've had any tape on my ankles. Sometimes you slip on a wet spot on the court or something like that, but because of the extra socks, it seems like my ankles are more encased. Never had a pulled muscle or anything along those lines. I'm basically 156 pounds, 5' 11". I try to stay between 155 and 160.

**Do you try to eat healthy?**

A lot of yogurt, a lot of vegetables, a lot of chicken. Grilled chicken and salad.

**Do you splurge on treats ever?**

Yes. The season ended for me this year on June 21. I take one day off in between the end of this past season and this season coming up. I go to Baskin and Robbins. I get an ice cream cone with sprinkles. Double dip. I go crazy. I take a day off so there's a separation between seasons psychologically.

**So that's the only ice cream you'll eat during the year?**

That's part of my motivation as well, to have a little treat every once in awhile. A treat here and there would be a Twinkie. The Hostess Zingers? That's a major treat. If I'm really tired, some of these hotels have these concierge lounges. You just go in and they have these little cupcakes. I look for a Zinger or something to pick me up. I'm not impervious to that. That's another motivation to run, knowing that every once in awhile if I want to fall off the wagon and get some sweets, I don't have a problem with that.

**Do you follow professional running at all?**

Not really.

**How about other sports?**

I play some tennis in the summer. I love baseball, so I follow baseball. All professional sports. NASCAR. I'm a big Jeff Gordon fan. I love golf, the NHL. Years ago, I used to ride the rodeo and stuff like that. That's an occupational disaster for what I do. I used to water ski a lot. And then I figured I don't want my career to come to an end on the Hudson River up here.

**Is there anything about running that you hate?**

Nothing that I hate, no. I wish there was a better way to stay in shape than the run every day. But there isn't. No. The fact is that my occupation as a professional referee requires me to run, and without one, I wouldn't have known about the other. And now they've both become a part of my life. So much so that people say to me, "Are you still going to run every day after you retire?" Running doesn't stop when my refereeing stops, that's for sure. It has just turned me on to a different situation.

I can honestly say that at the end of my eight miles tonight, I do not get that euphoric feeling that people say is there. I don't feel euphoric when I come back from my run. To me, it's tough every night. It's not that easy. I marvel at those who do the 10Ks and marathons and stuff like that, I admire them immensely.

**How did the race with Charles Barkley at the All Star game come about?**

That's a mystery. It really started as a joke. Early January, I had a game on TNT. Lakers at Sacramento. Charles Barkley was filling in for Steve Kerr at the game. He's usually a studio guy. They decided to have him courtside with Marv Albert. Marv always sends someone out, and says, "Dick, what game is this?" My 2,211 consecutive game. At some point during the first half, they show me running up the court. Marv makes a comment, like "This is Dick Bavetta's 2211h consecutive game." Charles starts to laugh. He said, "Are you kidding me? This guy is so old, he's lucky he can even get up and down the court." Marv chimes in saying, "He runs 5 to 8 miles a day." Charles says, "How do you know that? Have you seen

him? He's too old." They start kidding back and forth about age. And at that point Marv says, "I'll tell you what Charles, with the terrible shape you're in, I wouldn't challenge this guy to a race because he would beat you easily." That's when Charles says there's no way a 67-year-old man can beat a 44-year-old former player. It kind of escalated from that, just as a joke, really. My friends are calling me asking if I've heard what he's saying, I'm just saying, "That's just Charles being Charles. "

I warm up the same every game; I just do a running in place type thing. They show me doing that. Charles is back in the studio, and he says, "That's not even him running, they're fast-forwarding it to make it seem like he's running." Marv: I think you ought to talk about this with him. Charles: He's so old, he can't hear. Not only can he not run, he can't hear. It took on a life of it's own. And people started getting curious. Can someone 67 beat someone 44?

**So when did it get formalized?**

Just a few days before.

**And there was a charity component?**

TNT gave \$25,000, NBA gave \$50,000 to the Boys & Girls Club of Las Vegas. They picked the charity, decided to put it on TV, and the rest was history. It was like a ratings bonanza. I can't explain it.

**Did you want to do it?**

Absolutely, for charity. My goodness.

**I wish it could have been a mile on the track.**

Well, as it turns out, I very quickly found out that I am not a sprinter. We went up and down the court three times, a total of probably 25, 30 seconds, and I'm saying, "All right, I'm ready." They're saying, "Dick, it's over, you lost. "

**You've got to challenge him to a rematch.**

That's what we're shooting for next year, Barkley-Bavetta II, in New Orleans, around the inside of the Superdome or something. I had nothing to do with the ground rules. Someone sets this up. In retrospect, he collapses at the finish. He's tripping trying to run backwards, then falls over the finish line and falls on his back, and they try to pick him up to have him say something and he cannot talk. If we had gone one more length of the court, he's toast. And it happened very, very quickly. I'm looking around; it's almost like the old Peggy Lee song, "Is that all there is?"

**So do you have a good relationship with Charles?**

Tremendous. We have always gotten along from his playing days. In the last couple years, he's always had a comment from the studio. "If he doesn't slow down, he's going to have a heart attack."

He was a lot faster than I thought. He's a big guy, big strides. The shorter the distance, the more beneficial it was to him. Plus, through his basketball career, that's all he did was wind sprints. Get me on a track; I'd be more familiar. That's not an excuse. The good of it all was for the charity.