

Run, Swim or Ride Across Canada

In the hallway of Reynolds Central School in Melfort, Sask., a big map of Canada charts the progress of a runner who's on a virtual trek across Canada. In fact, the runner represents the students of the school (kindergarten through Grade 6), who are on one big team, attempting to run the distance from St. John's, Nfld., to Vancouver as part of an online program called the Canadian Cross Country Fitness Challenge.

How does it work? Each student runs five laps before gym class every day. Those laps are recorded and added together, then calculated into kilometres for a weekly grand total. Then students log on to the Web site www.c2cfit.com and input the school's most-recent mileage (if everyone's at school and running, that adds up to 44 kilometres a day!). The online map shows the school's progress, and students put the same information on the map displayed in the hallway of the school to keep everyone involved. By April the 200 students had virtually run across Newfoundland, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia and were partway through Quebec.

Lee Downer, a YMCA fitness counsellor in Toronto, developed the Canadian Cross Country Fitness Challenge as a personal challenge – he wanted to virtually walk, bike or run the 10,529 kilometres across Canada. When friends and other people showed interest and started signing up, Downer decided to invite all Canadians to take part for a small fee. Here's why the Canadian Cross Country Fitness Challenge works for adults and kids.

- **It's a form of techno-entertainment.** The program weaves computers and the Internet together with physical education, math and social studies, says Mariette Baker-McDermid, the principal of Reynolds Central School.
- **It's affordable.** Generally, elementary-school students are charged \$1 each. High-school students are encouraged to form teams of up to five for an annual fee of \$32.10 per team. Adults pay \$37.45 each, while a family pays \$75. Membership provides participants with private online maps that chart their progress and links to areas of interest. Certificates and winners are included in the soon-to-be-published



Students from one school are running across Canada – right in their own gym.

Canadian Cross Country Fitness Challenge Achievers Book.

- **Participants get to discover Canada.** The Canadian Cross Country Fitness Challenge Web site links to provincial tourist sites as well as virtual tours of cities along the route. For example, at the 1,240-kilometre mark, you can link to Halifax and learn about its history, commerce and places of interest. "It's a great way to learn about new places," says Jamie Ferguson, a Grade 5 student.
- **It's about doing – not winning or losing.** For some kids, this could be the only team they get on, says Baker-McDermid.
- **The regular activity helps develop skills for other activities.** Student Hannah Stevenson says, "You get better at long-distance running and sprinting." Another student says that it gets him in shape for hockey.
- **Anything goes.** While students from the school decided to run laps, participants can do any type of fitness activity – such as walking, biking, swimming or rowing – to get across Canada.
- **It provides a link to fabulous role models.** The Canadian Cross Country Fitness Challenge participants can post questions on the Web site to Olympic athletes, including swimmer Alex Baumann and cyclist and speed skater Clara Hughes.
- **It provides a feeling of ownership.** The challenge is hands-on, especially for the Grade 5 students at Reynolds, who are learning about Canada for social studies and who do all the math and upload weekly distances onto the Web site.

Get Fit – and Go for the Jackpot

Less than two years ago, Marg Unger was so out of shape she could hardly make it up a flight of stairs. The 49-year-old wife and mother, who lives just outside Grande Prairie, Alta., was very overweight and had bad knees, high blood pressure, low energy and a poor self-image. Fed up with fad diets, Marg signed up with a friend for the Fit 'N Firm Challenge (www.fitnfirm.ca), a program that offers a healthy approach to exercise and eating; as an added incentive, she joined the Grande Prairie Challenge, which had an entry fee of \$135 and featured thousands of dollars in prize money. To date, Marg hasn't won any money, but she's a winner nonetheless: she goes to the gym for two hours every day and has lost 60 pounds.

The Fit 'N Firm Challenge was started by Laura Hancharuk, a fitness consultant at the Be Fit for Life Centre at Grande Prairie Regional College. She saw the need for safe and practical knowledge about fitness and health and, along with creating a supportive group structure for participants, discovered that cash rewards worked a little magic, too.

How does it work? Participants exercise (at home or a fitness centre); some diet on their own and compete with others to see who makes the biggest changes in body measurements. (At the beginning of the program, their weight, fat and muscle content, and resting heart rate are measured.) Participants receive an information package and are invited to seminars designed to support their fitness efforts. The seminars include "How to Get Started with Exercise and Weight Loss," "How to Design a Home Exercise Program," and "Nutrition for Health and Fitness." At the end of the challenge (it currently runs between 14 and 16 weeks), participants have their measurements taken again and are awarded points for positive changes to determine the winners.

The first year, 144 participants competed for \$7,200 (split between top male and female competitors in two age categories). This year, the third Grande Prairie Challenge has more people and more than double the prize money. There are also separate challenges in Edmonton; Red Deer, Alta.; Lethbridge, Alta.; Medicine Hat, Alta.;