

April 2017 *Wingfoot* Spotlight: More Runners are Gearing Up with Gadgets By Theoden James

Dylan Kight heads out for every single run with an Apple Watch Series 2 wrapped around his left wrist – which would, at first blush, seem to make the 32-year-old Atlanta resident pretty typical: According to Running USA’s 2016 National Runner Survey, more than half of the 10,000-plus runners polled said they wear a sports watch while getting in their mileage.



Then you notice what Kight puts on his *right* wrist before every run, and suddenly, he’s not so typical anymore.

“When I first started running (about two years ago), I’d run with my phone,” Kight says. “When I started doing longer races, I hated having something strapped to my arm for that long. So I got the Garmin 235 – and I love it; it’s great. It’s just ... I’m a completist. I like getting my Activity Rings on the Apple Watch. But I also use Strava, and the Garmin 235 uploads via Bluetooth onto my iPhone, and then uploads to Strava. The Apple Watch at this point doesn’t do that, so you have to manually enter them.”

If you can’t see where this is going by now, let him summarize: “I’ll run with both of them, on opposite wrists,” he says. “And yes, I look ridiculous.”

While he may seem extreme, Kight certainly isn’t alone in his love of running tech.

For proof of the public appetite, one need look no further than January’s CES 2017 consumer-technology trade show. Alongside OLED TVs and smart refrigerators, exhibitors hyped the latest and greatest GPS watches and headphones, as well as much geekier technology – from socks with built-in pressure sensors to measure landing forces to a gadget that uses LED lights to release nitric oxide, prompting your body to go into recovery mode.

But is all (or any) of this stuff really necessary? It depends on who you talk to.

For 35-year-old Stephanie Reynolds of Marietta – who runs with a Garmin Forerunner 735XT, a Garmin Foot Pod, AfterShokz bone conduction headphones and Apace Vision LED Safety Lights that clip on to her shoes – the answer is yes, absolutely.

“Seriously,” she says, “the thought of running without that stuff gives me straight-up anxiety.”

Then there are the outliers; people like Eric Fort of Fort Lauderdale, Florida, who has trained for and run seven marathons with just the clothes on his back and the shoes on his feet. (Running USA’s survey reported that just 10 percent of respondents eschew gadgets entirely.)

“In today’s day and age, we all constantly have our cell phones right next to us,” says Fort, 48, who attended Campbell High School in Smyrna. “Running is my time to clear my head and get away from all that crap. When I’m running and I see someone fiddling with their phone or playing with their watch, I’m just like, ‘God, I’m glad I’m not that person.’”

He must think that to himself quite a lot. According to that 2016 National Runner Survey, 61 percent of runners run with their cell phone; and 52 percent run with a “GPS item.”

The popularity of the latter category is no surprise; after all, there are some big benefits to taking GPS technology on the run. The most obvious is that it can give runners a good idea of how their training is going and what their fitness level is, thanks to detailed data on distance and pacing and number of calories burned, etc.

There are less-tangible benefits, too.

“Some people really do thrive on interacting with their gadgets or the data. They have fun with it, they find interesting correlations in it,” says Olympian and Atlanta-based running entrepreneur Jeff Galloway, who bought his first GPS watch a few years ago. “Plus, I like that it allows people to wander free when they run – rather than having to go to a set, measured course – and still get in the certain amount of miles they want.”

For athletes who like to keep finding those interesting correlations in or keep having fun with the data *after* the fact, GPS also is the backbone of Strava’s popular website and app, which allow them to upload runs from their devices, keep track of performance over time, and see how they stack up with other members of the Strava community.

Boulder-based pro Neely Spence Gracey, the top American woman at both the Boston Marathon (2:35) and the AJC Peachtree Road Race (33:25) last year, says the three dozen runners she coaches formed a club on the Strava website that has become a great way for them to interact – they can comment on each other’s workouts, talk a little friendly trash every once in a while, but most importantly, encourage one another.

And they even managed to get Gracey to join in the fun, despite her reservations.

“I get a lot of really positive feedback from it,” she says of sharing her workouts on Strava. “It’s been really cool to create that connection with the running community. But I was (originally) very against using it, because I didn’t really want to put it out there, like, ‘Oh, look, I stopped five times to pee on this run!’ Or whatever it could be that people can take from looking at all of your data.”

Even now, she’s got the privacy settings in Strava set up to hide all areas within a half-mile from her house, “because I don’t want people to see where I live. You have to consider: If this gets in the hands of the wrong person, what might happen?”

Privacy concerns are certainly one of the downsides of technology.



But the more-common issue, Jeff Galloway says, is that he routinely hears from runners who are too tied up in the data, who feel guilt or disappointment or frustration because of the numbers displayed on their gadgets’ touchscreens.

Case in point: Stephanie Reynolds – the “self-described gadget nerd” – nearly had a meltdown during the New York City Marathon last fall, when her Garmin lost its signal on the Queensboro Bridge around Mile 16.

“After I was able to get out from under the bridge and reconnect, my average pacing was all messed up,” she says. “So I’m trying to do math in my head the whole time, saying, ‘OK, what do I need to do now?’ That was a stressful moment. It messed up my race plan, and it took me awhile to



regroup. I'm like, 'OK, I depend on this watch and it failed on me, so now what do I do?'"

Fifty-six-year-old Jeff McGonnell – a Davidson, North Carolina, resident with more than 200 ultramarathons under his belt – has long rolled his eyes at these types of tech-addicted runners.

"I made fun of the guys that I've run with for years," he says. "We've got this six-mile loop in Davidson, and these guys will stand there waiting 'til their watch syncs up to a satellite. I'm like, 'It's the same six miles, guys – we're not changing this route, it doesn't make any difference if your watch is on or not, it's still gonna be six miles.'"

In the end, it's really about balancing how much you allow technology to rule your running, according to a couple of people who know a thing or two about the sport.

"Tomorrow, I'm going to the track and I have some 400s and 800s," Neely Spence Gracey told us when we spoke to her in February, "and I will want to hit specific paces, or at least get within a pace range. Having a watch, and paying attention to it, and the splits will be a big part of what I do during the workout.

"But sometimes it's nice to just take it off, run what you feel like doing, and not really worry about it. I mean, this morning I did 10 miles and I think I looked at my watch for the first time at 56 minutes. On days like today, I go out, I'm talking, I'm having fun, I'm enjoying being outside, I'm socializing with my friends, and I'm letting the miles click off."

Three-time U.S. Olympian Shannon Rowbury concurs.

"I came from dance before running; I started dancing at five and then running in high school," says the San Francisco-based pro, who finished fourth in the 1,500 meters in Rio last August. "My studies in school were more creative-based – English, theater, film – and I definitely feel that running is both an art and a science.

"I've only had one injury my entire career that's kept me from competing (a stress fracture in 2007), and I think that kind of consistency comes from that ability that I have to balance the art and the science – to understand that you need the data to improve year after year, but you also need the self-awareness to be able to say, 'I need to relax a little bit today,' or 'OK, I feel like I can push it.'"

Your Garmin, unfortunately, isn't smart enough to make that decision for you. Not yet, at least...