

# Inspired by running heroes in print, on the path and in school

By Bruce Brothers  
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As I ran around Como Lake the other day, I encountered the pied piper of Twin Cities race walking, Gary Westlund, running as usual with a contingent of friends and minions.

"It's good to be moving, isn't it?" he shouted as we passed.

"You're a hero, Gary," I hollered back, and as we continued in opposite directions, I realized the word I meant to use was "inspiration" rather than hero.

Westlund has had hip-replacement surgery on both sides and is still out there running and/or race walking, coaching people and encouraging everyone he sees and raising cash for deserving organizations through his Charities Challenge operation.

On this day, the late-afternoon sun was dropping faster than leaves off the shoreline's trees as I mused about the difficulties of running with the ailments that seem to strike more frequently as the number of sunsets we've experienced adds up.

Sometimes, it's really hard.

Westlund's quick, enthusiastic words of encouragement and a sore ankle that wasn't too sore persuaded me to lope through a second loop of Como. So, the next time we passed, I was able to toss out a correction, putting smiles on both of our faces.

Funny how rewards increase as a person spends more time with Mother Nature.

Later on in that second lap, I spotted the unmistakable, majestic wingspan of a bald eagle swooping above the water for supper. A few minutes later, I came upon the same noble bird on a branch near the Como Pavilion, perched proudly above a growing group of gawking humans. He surveyed the commotion on the walking path with obvious detachment, all the while keeping an eye out for what would certainly qualify as the freshest of fish dinners.

That's not an everyday sight at a city lake.

Neither, however, was the albino squirrel that crossed my path a quarter mile down the shore.

Before I left the lake to trot home, I was feeling graced by a convergence of positive experiences.

They began with my running into Westlund, and I have to say, if you look at the good he creates, hero might be the appropriate word to describe him. The Anoka native would easily fit into the pages of Runner's World magazine.

The December issue of RW lists nine people as their 2006 "heroes of running," and topping the list are former Olympian Frank Shorter and Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee. Shorter won gold and silver medals in consecutive Olympic marathons, helping launch

the running boom in the United States. Huckabee dropped 110 pounds and became an advocate for proper health and nutrition.

There must be a zillion "heroes of running" out there.

Carrie Tollefson is one.

A three-time national champion and former Olympian, Tollefson last month was inducted into the track and field wall of fame at Villanova University, where she was a five-time NCAA champion. The St. Paul resident, who set prep records at Dawson-Boyd High School, served as an assistant cross country coach at the Blake School this fall.

Four of Tollefson's Team USA Minnesota teammates also have been working with youngsters.

Chris Lundstrom is the head boys and girls cross country coach at Como Park High School, Jason Lehmkuhle and Matt Gabrielson are assistants with the Edina High School boys cross country and track programs, and Kristen Nicolini is an assistant girls cross country coach at Edina.

"I love the sport of distance running," Lundstrom said, "so coaching is a way to share that. My goal as a coach is largely to increase participation and enjoyment of the sport so that team members gain an appreciation for running and continue doing it long after high school."

Also the Nordic ski coach and an assistant track coach at Como, Lundstrom added, "I encourage the runners to compete with themselves first and worry about other teams and other runners only secondarily."

Much like contributions from Westlund and Huckabee and Tollefson and others, Lundstrom's dedication to the sport qualifies as heroic in my book.

Bruce Brothers can be reached at [bbrothers@pioneerpress.com](mailto:bbrothers@pioneerpress.com).