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## Man on the run

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WINCHESTER — Avid runners often speak of the natural high they get after an hour or so of pounding the pavement. But few runners' euphoria can compete with the rush **Mark Stickley**, 52, got last month after running his first race in more than six years.

Years of running had worn out the cartilage in his left knee, keeping him sidelined from the sport that is his passion and his livelihood.

In February, stem cells were removed from his hip bone and injected into his knee to stimulate the growth of cartilage. So successful was the procedure, **Stickley** was able to run a 5K in early November in 18 minutes and 40 seconds. A few weeks later, he clocked 17:56 in another 5K.

"I'm like a kid at Christmastime. I've got my running life back," said **Stickley**, a Winchester resident who coaches the Handley High School boys' cross-country team and the owner of Runners' Retreat on the Loudoun Street Mall.

There was a time when completing a 5K would be nothing to crow about.

An avid runner since age 13, **Stickley** estimates he has run 100,000 miles in his lifetime. He has completed 25 marathons, qualified three times for the Olympic trials and still holds the school record at Virginia Tech in the 10,000-meter race. For a few years, he earned a bit of money by running professionally.

Now, **Stickley** said, he's not looking to relive those glory days, he just wants to run. "I am thrilled with my six-minute pace now at my age and with what I've been through," he said.

Using his own stem cells to fix his knee was an expensive option with few guarantees. But after years of trying various therapies that gave little relief, one more treatment was worth a try, he said.

Luckily, this one worked, he said.

"Stem cells are God's way of giving us spare parts," said **Stickley**, sitting in the back room of his retail store surrounded by boxes of running shoes. "And then he gave us people smart enough to know how to use them."

'I knew it was game over'

In March 2009, **Stickley** was five miles into a 10-mile run when he felt a sharp pain in his left knee.

"As long as I've been running, I knew it was game over," he said. "It basically popped."

He saw doctors in Winchester and at the University of Virginia. He consulted an orthopedic surgeon in Fairfax who looked at his MRI and said simply, "Wow, this is bad," **Stickley** recalled.

Then came the treatments — physical therapy, chiropractic, massage, acupuncture. He even had a lubricant-like mixture that comes from chicken combs injected into his knee.

"You name it, I did it," he said.

Being sidelined was frustrating for someone who had competed and trained his entire life. Everyone was always asking him how far and fast he was running. His injury also made coaching more difficult.

"I felt so handicapped coaching cross-country," he said. "Because my style was to be all over the course."

But one of the biggest disappointments was that he wasn't able to run with his sons, who were getting old enough to start competing.

"I always wanted to be able to run with them when they're older," he said.

In December 2009, he had arthroscopic surgery that smoothed out the wear and tear, but even that wasn't the ideal fix.

The surgery, he said, "allowed me to run, but it wasn't going to let me run with any sort of intensity. There was no lubricant in my knee."

But during a Christmas party in 2013, a doctor friend told him about a stem cell procedure she heard had been successfully used with horses.

**Stickley** was willing to try. Not only could he not run, he couldn't walk comfortably and was forced to climb steps with an awkward stiff-legged strategy.

"It was a quality-of-life issue," he said. "As for running, that seemed like a pipe dream. I had pretty much given up on running."

The procedure's \$6,000 price tag was the only downside, he said. Health insurance does not cover it.

"I had no fear of rejection — they were my own stem cells," said **Stickley**, adding that he is opposed to the use of embryonic stem cells.

In late February, the stem cells were harvested from his hip bone through a long needle, a painful procedure that some say feels like an epidural.

"I'm not going to kid you, it was brutal," **Stickley** said. "The worst part was when [the doctor] said, "OK, we got that half."

How long will it last?

Stem cell regeneration therapy has been around for decades, according to Dr. Rodney Dade, who performed the procedure on **Stickley** in the Fairfax office of his practice StemCell Arts.

The procedure works well on injuries to the ligaments, joint or tendons where bone isn't rubbing against bone, he said.

A typical patient who could benefit would be someone who suffers from severe arthritis. People with shoulder pain, rotator cuff injuries, tennis elbow or chronic back and neck pain could also be helped.

How well the therapy works depends on the depth and location of the damage, he said.

If the patient can move again and their pain has been reduced then the procedure is considered successful, Dade said.

"We're really pleased with the outcome of **Mark's** case," he said.

Insurance companies, however, require more data and studies before they will start covering the procedure, he said. StemCell Arts is participating in one such study now.

"It's just a matter of time before insurance covers this procedure," Dade said.

**Stickley** doesn't need study results or even an X-ray to convince him that there's cartilage in his knee. He can do a deep knee squat now when he couldn't before. He is able to train harder, clocking in 40 hours of running time each week.

The only thing he wonders about is how long his improved knee will last.

"Do I get 3,000 miles out of this knee or do I get 15,000 miles out of this knee?" **Stickley** said. "I'm going to put it through its limits."

He's hopeful the knee will last for years now that he knows the reason his cartilage wore out.

By reviewing videos of his running gait, experts have been able to show him he had been running incorrectly. He worked with a physical therapist for weeks to build up his hip muscles and improve his running stance.

And when he finally started running again he started slowly, walking for 5 minutes then running for 1 minute. By June, he was running straight through.

"That was the hardest part with **Mark** — was getting him to slow down," said Annetta Haddox with P.R.O. Physical Therapy in Winchester, who worked with **Stickley** for weeks after his procedure. "I told him, 'You had this done, now let's get it right.'"

If training goes well, **Stickley** would like to run the Apple Blossom 10K during the festival in early May. "It's so fun to run Apple Blossom when you're from here and you know a lot of people," said **Stickley**, who graduated from Strasburg High School.

But he's not interested in running the race just to smile and wave at old friends. He wants to win in his age category, or at least come close.

Eager to be a competitor, he has run several 5Ks in the last couple of months. Maybe one too many. He is going to take the holidays to regroup and rest a bit, he said this week.

"I don't want to push myself too much and I tend to do that. After six years, I don't want to break something else." — Contact Robyn Fontes Taylor at

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