

Walking and Running for Health: The Booming Sports Bussiness Era

Kornkanok Pongpradit

Thailand's overall sports business in 2019 increased by 6–7% year on year, in line with consumer behavior trends with heightened awareness and attention to health care and exercise. The prevalence of Thais exercising and playing sports increased to 24.4% in 2018. That is, approximately 1 in 4 of Thais (16.03 million people) choose to exercise and play sports, with walking and running for health leading the way.

During 2019, many types of sports businesses were clearly growing both in sales and revenue through various channels and media. The Department of Business Development expected that the sports business in 2019 would expand by approximately 6% from the previous year, in accordance with consumer behavior trends, with heightened awareness and attention to health care and exercise. Sports attire has also become a fashion statement, and the market in sportswear is thriving. Engaging in sports are encouraged by campaigns and continuous support by the government and private agencies in various areas such as football leagues, boxing, and other activities which involve healthy exertion.¹

Popular sports and exercises from past to present

If looking back in time, the fads and trends for different types of sports activities of Thais has ebbed and flowed. For example, in 1981 a group of joggers was

organized. Dr. Udomsilp Srisangnam who led a gathering of over 80,000 runners at the event called “Sky Run to Honor the Monarchy” (Royal Marathon-Bangkok). In 1987², Dr. Krisada Banchuen published a book about running in particular,³ and there was a burst of interest in tennis when “Super Ball” Paradorn Srichaphan and “Tammy” Tammarine Thanasukarn rose in the professional tennis world rankings. Golf became more popular after many successful Thai professionals competed at the international level, following the popularity of badminton which had a number of top Thai competitors, both male and female. According to May Ratchanok Intanon, many parents are interested in sending their children to certain schools in order to have the opportunity to excel at sports.

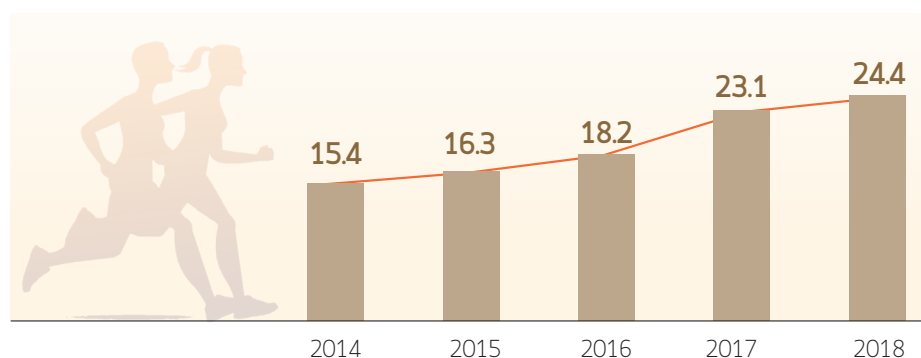
However, the popularity of various sports, as mentioned above, has not really translated into a “boom” in the industry and sports business. This may be due to the limited sporting events and opportunities, especially for those interested in just trying out a new sport. The

number of sports enthusiasts nationally is also small as a proportion of the total population. This may be due to equipment restrictions, the cost of playing a sport, or having a place to practice a sport.

That said, the popularity of running/jogging activities for health of Thais has increased significantly. Nowadays, people of all ages turn their attention to power walking and jogging. Data from surveillance surveys of physical activity of Thais over the past shows the increasing trend

in this phenomenon. The rebound of the number of Thais exercising and playing sports which involve vigorous movement has increased every year, from 15.4% in 2014 to 18.2% in 2016 and to 23.1 and 24.4% in 2017 and 2018, respectively. At the time of this report, approximately 1 in 4 Thais (16.03 million people) are choosing to engage in regular physical activity by exercising and playing sports by walking - running for health.

Figure 1: Percentage of Thais exercising for health by walking-jogging during 2014-18⁴



Source : Thailand Physical Activity Knowledge Development Centre (TPAK),
Institute for Population and Social Research Mahidol, University

This walking-running trend is becoming more widespread throughout the country. In 2019 alone, there were as many as 200-250 health running events per month or about 3,000 per year. This can be considered a unique phenomenon which has never occurred like this before in Thai society. Small and medium events attract approximately 1,000 - 5,000 people each. Such small-scale events are expanding to include the district and sub-district level. Larger events include provincial-level runs such as ThaiHealth's Chombueng Marathon, Bangsaen Marathon, Amazing Thailand Marathon Bangkok, Phuket Marathon, Chiang Mai Marathon, etc. There can be tens of thousands of people⁵ who join these events such that, at present, there is not less than 15 million Thais who have participated in these running events for health promotion and other good causes.

Statistics of the Thai Jogging Federation show that, in 2007, there were only 5 million runners in Thailand. That means that, in the past ten years, the number of Thais who are interested in healthy walking and running activities have increased by approximately 10 million people.



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In addition, government, civil society and local administrative organizations also encourage exercise in both walking and running at the community level throughout the country such that the popularity of the walk-run trend has become a movement.

Dr. Pairoj Saonuam Director of the Office of Health Promotion in Health Service System of ThaiHealth, said that, nowadays, Thais are starting to spend more time maintaining their health through exercise. Fully 70% primarily exercise with walking and/or using bicycles, and that is one goal of ThaiHealth as part of a strategy to reduce sedentary behavior. This can also help address socio-economic and environmental problems. There has been research on this topic, for example, in the Soi Ngam Du Phli neighborhood of Sathorn District in Bangkok, Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province, Na Thawi Subdistrict Municipality, Na Thawi District, Songkhla Province, Ranong Municipality, Ranong Province, Phitsanulok Municipality, Phitsanulok Province, Trang Municipality, Trang Province, and strengthening walking or biking for cultural tourism in Chiang Kham District, Phayao Province, among many others.⁶

Walking and running for health: Booming Sports Business

If just considering the sports business dimension, in each major running event, the organizer must provide sports shirts to the participants, souvenirs, meals, and beverages. In another corner, the runners themselves have to be prepared, using various equipment such as running shoes, warm-up suits, and running jerseys, or technological equipment used in running. This phenomenon is a boon to the sports business sector, which has been growing and expanding tremendously over the years.

From the information in Table 1, it can be seen that, during 2017-2019, the products with the highest growth rate are products in the sport shoes category (expansion of about 43%), followed by sports clothing (expanded by approximately 22%) resulting in the overall rate of expansion of the products in the sports related group by nearly 60%. The value of imported products in the sports gear group



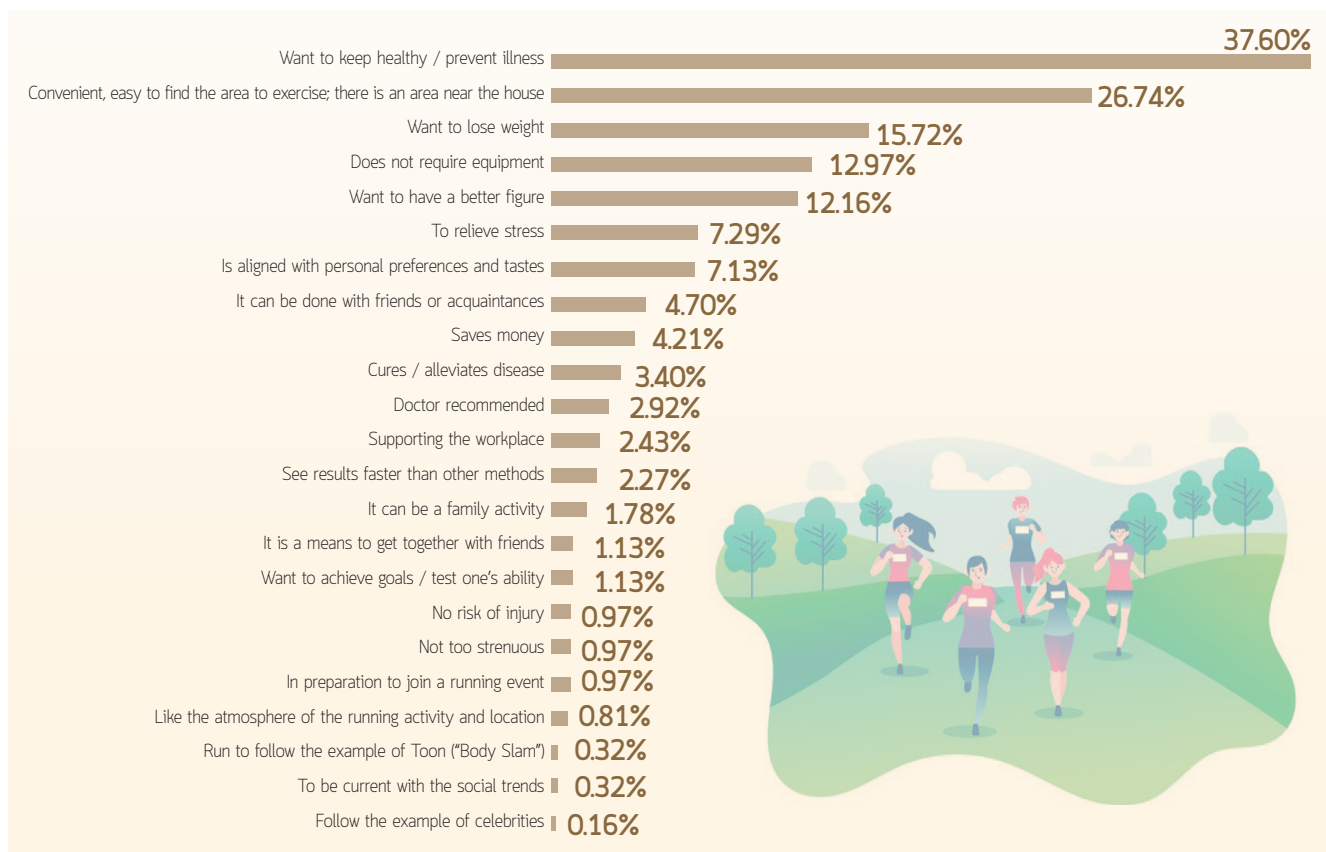
Table 1: Import value of important sports goods and equipment: 2017-2019⁷

product	Million baht value			Expansion By year (%)		
	2017	2018	2019	2017	2018	2019
1) Outfits	5,418.74	6,951.78	8,451.09	8.61	28.29	21.57
2) Shoes	3,168.16	4,509.98	6,470.50	6.80	42.35	43.47
3) Equipment	4,908.35	5,518.24	5,071.43	-1.67	12.43	-8.10
Total	13,495.24	16,979.99	19,993.02	13.74	83.07	56.94

Source : Information and Communication Technology Center Office of the Permanent Secretary In collaboration with the Customs Department

totals nearly 20 billion baht. The market value of business and sporting goods in Thailand in 2018 is estimated to have had a value of up to 120 billion baht and is expected to grow at least another 5% with the current rate of expansion. This increase in the sports business sector is occurring in tandem with the increased level of exercise. There is more demand for related products, whether it is shoes or sportswear, and there are products designed specifically for certain sports to the extent that they are becoming a fashion statement.

Figure 2 : Reasons for choosing to exercise by walking-jogging for health: 2018



Source : Thailand Physical Activity Knowledge Development Centre (TPAK),
Institute for Population and Social Research Mahidol, University

Why do Thais like walking-running for health?

In addition to the promotion of exercise through various media of the sports business, just considering the campaigns for health through sports and physical activity, it can be said that this is a time to let “100 flowers bloom.” This is especially the case for walking-running for health that has received the unprecedented attention of the public. The results of a survey show that most of the reasons for this trend are related to internal motivation, heightened health awareness, wanting to be healthy and have a healthy body, wanting to be resilient against common illness, and wanting to lose weight and be in good shape. People see the advantages of jogging/ power walking as an activity that can be conveniently performed in terms of space and amenities that are nearest to home. There is no need to use complicated or expensive equipment or tools. Interest has also been stimulated by celebrity marathon events (see Figure 2).

Summary

Today, one can see pictures of healthy runners in the park, open areas, or along roads in different villages, where walking-running is a morning or evening routine. The phenomenon of exercising for health has created a new dimension of physical activity which is sure to impact positively on the health of the nation. When so many people put on their sports shoes to go for a walk or jog, this can be considered a transition to a new lifestyle and quality of life. At that moment, the risk of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) including obesity starts to decrease. All of this healthy movement will help reduce the preventable expenditure on chronic illness and other debilitating conditions. Thus, the trend in walking-running for health, aside from creating benefits for the industry and business in sports, also has a direct positive effect on the personal level of each participant. Taken as a whole, these exercise enthusiasts are helping to make Thailand a healthy society, with tremendous savings in health care costs, among many other benefits.

