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MARATHON GIRL

by Kat Avila



(portions previously published in SNAIL TALES, newsletter of the Snail's Pace Running Club; re-edited for JADE Magazine)

"Where is she going, mama?" asked the three-year-old of her parents as I jogged by during a long run. Everybody else was walking the other way to gawk at a roadside brush fire. Here I was running in the opposite direction. It's like that sometimes. Your friends are inviting you to go to the movies, go drinking, visit a new restaurant, and all you want to do is NIKE - "Just Do It" - get in the day's run. Training for a marathon takes stubborn commitment. It's about building a body that can and wants to endure a 26.2-mile urban hike.

I had the usual reasons for wanting to do a marathon. To lose weight. To break 30 minutes for a 5-K run, which is about three miles. A sub-30 remained as elusive as a low-fat beef hamburger, but I finally did it in my fourth month of training. Another reason was to dodge the familial hereditary bad stuff like adult-onset diabetes and high blood pressure. I lost 10 pounds and firmed up. My blood pressure stopped climbing. A university study I volunteered for proved, at least in my case, the effect of exercise when I'm under stress is lowered blood pressure.

When I first started running, I huffed and puffed from light pole to light pole, finally around the block. When my sister and I did our first 5-K, we were just going to walk but getting caught up in the spirit of things we ended up jogging part of the way.

Through a local road race publication I found a marathon training group to join. At the first meeting, we sorted ourselves into pace groups after a timed 5-K run. The groups weren't rigid, but existed to help us train at a level appropriate for our ability and conditioning. There was even a group for walkers. Each pace group was led by one or more volunteer coaches.

We met every Saturday morning for six months. The usual routine was to pick up that week's training schedule, listen to a seminar given by a running expert, then do a long run with our pace group. The long run increased by one to two miles every week or two weeks. Your body eventually builds up enough endurance to do a final long run of 20 to 21 miles approximately a month before the marathon. Adrenaline gets you through the last five miles on the day of the marathon.

During the week I dutifully tried to follow the training schedule, taking rest days when it said not to run and forcing myself out of bed early on days I was supposed to run, usually for about 30 to 60 minutes. If you didn't do your "homework," you would really feel it during the long run on Saturday when you tried to keep up with your group.

I committed myself to doing a four- to six-mile loop around a manmade lake with a running shop-sponsored club.

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On Wednesday evenings, I committed myself to doing a four- to six-mile loop around a manmade lake with a running shop-sponsored club. Afterwards the club would order dinner at a local pizzeria to swap weekend race results and training tips.

Partnering up with other runners helped me to maintain a steady pace during a run, to have a safe run, and to stay motivated. My pacing partners - Sylvia, Pat, Jim the racewalker, anyone else I adopted or who adopted me - made me push harder and longer than my couch potato alter ego would ever allow. They also taught me that while running may seem like a solitary sport there was teamwork involved when they walked back to check on other runners or when they compromised their own run to help someone else reach his/her training goal that day.

Training for a marathon is about resting as much as it is about running. I've experimented as much with recovery - including nutrition and sports drinks, menthol sports sprays, leg and foot massage lotions, ache- and pain-relieving gels and medication - as I have with my training schedule.

After three marathons, I still haven't learned everything.

If you don't respect your body's need for a break, the universe sticks its cosmic foot out and trips you into serious downtime through illness and injury. That's when you pull out your file folder of race brochures, photo proofs, and race time printouts. You clip the brochures, arrange photos, and write down race times in your scrapbook, and look into a complementary cross-training program to stay psyched up to return to the road.

Doubt sometimes creeps in. You wonder if you're a complete fool to even be running at your age, at your weight, at your whatever. You'll hear it from other people: "She's not a real runner."

Some embrace a simple dictionary definition of a runner: "One capable of running." Others argue that to be a "real" runner one must have internalized the concept of running as a sport, implying a responsibility for maintaining a certain level of speed while engaged in the activity, below which one then becomes a "walker." Still others point to fairly complex "You-Are-Here" hierarchies. Jeff Galloway in *GALLOWAY'S BOOK ON RUNNING* details a five-stage evolutionary journey toward becoming a runner starting with the amoeba (just kidding), I mean the beginner, then the jogger, the competitor, the athlete, finally ending with - ta dah! - the runner.

In identifying one's self as a runner, it may have more to do with one's assimilation of running as "a path with a heart" (a phrase borrowed from Carlos Castaneda), filled with personal challenges and times for celebration. John "The Penguin" Bingham reflects, "It isn't the shoes, socks, clothes, or even the speed that makes me a runner. It's running. I pay my membership dues every time I lace up my running shoes. I realize that every time I challenge myself to do more, struggle to get just a little faster, or face the limits of my abilities, I am a runner. A real runner, not just someone who runs" (*RUNNER'S WORLD*, 2/97).

After three marathons, I still haven't learned everything. To each race I have brought a different body, different goals. I am now in the middle of training for my fourth marathon. "So, tell me, how do you train for an ultra-marathon? What about recovery? Beer and pizza...?"

RECOMMENDED SITES:

Boston Marathon web site

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 [Click here to go to www.cdnnow.com](http://www.cdnnow.com)

<http://www.bostonmarathon.org/index2.htm>

(In 1972, women were officially allowed to run the Boston Marathon.)

Hal Higdon's training programs (from 5-K to marathon)

<http://www.halhigdon.com/>

Road Runner Sports online store

<http://www.roadrunnersports.com/>

Road Runners Club of America

<http://www.rrca.org/>

Runner's World magazine

<http://www.runnersworld.com/>

<http://www.womens-running.com/> (RW's women's running site)

Running Times magazine

<http://www.runningtimes.com/>

Team in Training (The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society)

Run or walk 26.2 miles, or cycle 100 miles to help cure leukemia and lymphoma.

<http://www.lsa-teamintraining.org/>

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