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iRun

NATASHA WODAK'S SECRET

Age-defying Olympian
on how she Cracked
the Marathon Code

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Give Yourself the Chance to Dream

Sasha Gollish pens a heartfelt letter to our community

Dear Dreamer,

You, yes you. You might be running the marathon, the half, perhaps it's the 10k or the 5k, or even the relay. Perhaps you came across this at your favourite local running store. Whomever or wherever you are—you too are a dreamer.

I want to tell you a story of: Why not? The story of putting yourself out there against the odds, knowing the outcome is not only uncertain, but has a potential for failure.

I want to tell you a fairy tale. No, not the contrived fairy tale where the prince(ss) sweeps you off your feet, the land is salvaged, and everyone comes away a winner. I want to tell you a real-life fairy tale, with mental monsters and body snatchers, the one with a sliding door and a multitude of outcomes.

Like fairy tales, getting to the start line of a race is a journey. Different characters come into your story and you are presented with obstacles along the way. There are joys. There are disappointments. At the end of it all, there's a story you get to tell.

My story of 'Why not?' and my story of 'What if?' begins in a faraway land, across the oceans, the mountains, and the valleys. My story is the 2023 World Athletics Championships marathon in Budapest, Hungary. Don't tune out now—this is not the story of how the high-performance athlete locked herself away and dedicated all her time and energy to one pursuit. Like you, I had to overcome hurdles to get to race day. My adversity began with my health back in the spring. Suddenly it felt like my legs were moving through mud when I ran, my joints felt achy and swollen. I felt tired all the time, and (worst of all) I lost my desire to run.

I had to redefine a new normal to get back to running, training and racing.

As my health improved and I felt competent on my feet again, I faced another obstacle: finding the time to train. That work-life-training fit for me, that's what's been challenging recently. I work with a collective of people studying the benefits and barriers to sport and exercise across an intersectionality lens, especially as it relates to gender. Sometimes I get wrapped up in the work, overcommit myself, and struggle to fit everything in.

Whomever told you it was a balance sold you a bill of goods.

One afternoon after I received a puzzling phone call. Hello, niceties, etc., followed by: "Sasha, are you in marathon shape?" The world diverged—in my head 'absolutely not,' but what came out of my mouth: 'Of course I am!' While the probability of lining up at the World Athletics Champs was low, it still lingered in the back of my head to leave me dreaming: 'What if I'm standing on the start line at the World Championships?'

Like any good fairy tale, I want to go back so we can move forward. This fairy tale of lining up with the world's best marathoners all starts





at the 2022 TCS Toronto Waterfront Marathon. Like many journeys, getting to the start of the 2022 Waterfront marathon was filled with challenges. With 8-weeks to go in this marathon build I contracted the Norwalk-virus, a virus that leaves you ravaged. Looking back at my training logs you might frame it as I missed almost two weeks of training. I framed it as I was sick and had to adjust my training, but not my goal.

Dreamer, I got to live a dream. I PB'd. I was surrounded by unbelievable crowds. Little did I know this glorious day was my World Championships qualifier.

Back to August 2023. As I stood at the start line for the World Championships, I knew my marathon was going to go one of two ways—it was going to be an out of body feeling that almost felt easy, or it was going to be a grind.

With only 22-days notice to the race I did not “panic-train.” I kept moving forward with what I was doing, but I did seek counsel from one of the best, a GOAT, Reid Coolsaet. Reid reminded me that while I probably felt flat from my training that come taper time I'd find that bounce in my stride. As a two-time Olympian who's had his fair share of ups and downs, Reid's words gave me confidence. Sometimes we think we're supposed to have all the answers, but I've learned

the hard way (too many times!) to ask for help when I need it most.

In my post-race interview I was asked why I accepted the invitation to world championships with so little notice. I said: ‘Why not?’ Too often we wait for perfection: the perfect build. The perfect feeling. We chase perfection—an allusive feeling when we need to open ourselves up to the opportunity of: What if?

I did not win the World Championships Marathon, but I did win the on-course party. Every time I felt my confidence waiver I listened to the crowds. I danced little steps through the music stations. I high-fived people for an energy power-up.

When you step up to your start give yourself the chance to dream. Lean into the crowds, feed off the cheers, and let the lesson of being brave and bold carry forth into your life—your life outside running—your other goals and objectives.

I'll see you at the start line and I'll be cheering for you as the crowds' cheer for us.

Every step of the way.

Sasha

Sasha Gollish is a coach, engineer, a PhD graduate and distance runner who brings a fierce spirit to every race. She burst on the scene in 2015 with a medal at the Pan Am Games in her hometown of Toronto and is a researcher at the University of Toronto's Mental Health and Physical Activity Research centre.



The RUNNERS SHOP
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Why do you love to run? By the Runner's Shop

I just celebrated my 25th year of running. I was a late comer to the party, but once I had drunk the kool-aid I was hooked! There are a couple of things that keep that lovin' feeling for me. First and foremost, the community. I have met so many wonderful people through running. As a run specialty retail store owner I have a unique opportunity to meet and chat with runners every day and everyday I'm inspired by their stories. My position as a store owner



and coach gives me a chance to advise, encourage and support other people's goals, which I deeply appreciate.

I also love how running keeps me healthy and happy. The runner's high is real! I have discovered as I age that my body is capable of much more than I once expected. There are so many exceptional and awesome masters athletes out there who continue to raise the bar for all of us. It keeps me coming back for more.



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EYE ON THE PRIZE:
Wodak, photographed
near her home outside of
Vancouver, ahead of the
World Championships
this August in Hungary.

Natasha Wodak, Reloaded

The Fastest Marathon Runner in Canadian History Makes Peace with Her Sport

Even before the sun rose in Japan, the heat was punishing. Over 120 years of modern marathon running have proven that temperatures over 15 C transform the distance into a war of attrition and a mental game of survival. By 30K into the race in Sapporo, it was 30 C. Commentators said it was perhaps the most difficult conditions ever for an Olympic marathon. Going into the race, Natasha Wodak was beginning to wonder if this would be her last professional race. Then 39, the Surrey, B.C. native could have been content capping a pro career—a 2016 Olympic appearance in the 10,000m, multiple national records and, to cap it all off, a brief but competent final act as an Olympic marathoner. But something didn't sit well with Wodak. It didn't seem like enough. So, on a scorching hot day in Japan, she kept running. Hard.

"I was not a child running prodigy. I ran my first race with my dad," says Wodak, a charismatic, familiar face to racing fans. "He was a bus driver, and we ran it for fun." But she enjoyed the freedom of running, joining the school track team in Grade 5. Wodak became the standout cross-country runner in her school, but she wasn't demolishing her provincial competition. "My best finish was third," she recalls. But her stride and tenacity led her gym teacher to connect Wodak with a cousin, one of Canada's all-time greatest distance runners, Lynn Kanuka.

Kanuka, who won a bronze medal at the 1984 Olympics in the 3,000m, remembers the first time she heard about Wodak. "My cousin said, 'She runs like the wind.'" Kanuka became a mentor, encouraging Wodak to continue running so long as she enjoyed it.

Wodak gained a U.S. scholarship at the University of Arkansas

at Little Rock, but only lasted three semesters. In 2001, she began taking classes at Simon Fraser University, and joined the team as a walk on. "I never won a title. I never made a national team," she says.

In late 2009, missing the structure and joy of running, she started showing up at SFU team practices and competing in local races, winning the Vancouver Sun Run 10K, and the Pioneer 8K. At the 8K, Wodak appeared as a runner possessed. She was so focused that she nearly missed breaking the tape. Even Wodak admits, looking back, that she was surprised by what she'd unlocked. "I remember saying to myself, 'What the ... ?'" As the 8K isn't a formal distance with known national records, it took some time before it was reported that Wodak had demolished the previous mark—this led to a career as a distance runner.

Her running was winning her races, but the 32-year-old doubted herself as she watched her peers achieve other milestones: hitting their stride with their careers, earning increasingly more money and putting down payments on houses in the Vancouver area. It was during this time, in the midst of a painful divorce, that she also knew she had to make a move from her training environment. The obvious fit was a move to coach Richard Lee and the B.C. Endurance Project (BCEP). Lee had a reputation as a brilliant coach, and a stable of talented young athletes.

She and Lee decided to up her weekly mileage and overall workload, focusing on the Toronto Waterfront Marathon that October for her debut at the distance. Although Wodak says her first year with BCEP was a positive experience, she began

to fear that it was not the right group for her, philosophically. “The dynamic with BCEP was not fun,” Wodak says. Lee took a more restrained, less emotionally engaged approach, and Wodak noticed the team’s culture echoed this tone. “It became a toxic culture,” she says. But Wodak continued to show improvement, so she buried herself in her training, ignoring the mounting discomfort she felt.

Her first marathon seemed like a success. She crossed the finish line 10th overall on a day when the Canadian national record was reset for the first time in 28 years at 2:28:00 by friend and occasional training partner Lanni Marchant. Wodak was visibly suffering as she crossed the finish line, and yet ran a near even second half to her opening 21.1K, showing patience and determination, two traits found only in the finest marathoners. She clocked in at 2:35:16, promising.

“That first marathon was brutal and when I finished, I was broken,” she says. “The way I approached training didn’t feel right and it caught up to me—physically and mentally.”

Wodak was struggling with severe plantar fasciitis. She was also becoming increasingly hard on herself as she faced setbacks. Meanwhile, her relationship with her coach also became strained. “Richard and I never found a way to communicate,” she says, though she continued running well. In 2016, Wodak made her first Olympic team in the 10,000m, a childhood dream, but the reality didn’t match the fantasy. “I wasn’t receiving funding from Athletics Canada, I was serving full time, and all my friends were having baby number two.”

Unreal Rio

Wodak describes standing on the track in the Olympic Stadium in Rio and finding herself in the midst of a strange, surreal, anxious dream. “Suddenly you realize it’s happening, but it’s not how you imagined it—then it’s done.” After the

The marathon is so often about patience, patience, patience, but there are moments when you feel good—feel like you’re flying. I’ll always treasure those moments.”



How do I get faster in my next race? By Boutique Endurance

You have to cover the basics. I’m a believer that you need to devote twelve to sixteen weeks to an event. And if your goal is the half marathon, plan on at least spending 90 minutes on your feet on your long run. Tempo runs are also important—where you run ten or twelve kilometres at race pace, or faster. It comes down to consistency and long-term planning. Can you change your diet in twelve weeks? Maybe. But want results? Change it over the whole year. A novice might see big increases, quickly. Speed workouts, long runs, you’ll get quicker. But all runners need to keep it fun. Want to get faster? That takes commitment. And it’s hard to commit to anything that isn’t fun. Boutiqueendurance.ca



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race, she found her parents and said, “I’m relieved it’s over,” and began to cry.

After Rio, her modest contract with ASICS ended and the company opted not to renew. She was also injured, again. And then the bottom fell out with her coach.

“Richard more or less said I was uncoachable,” she says.

Unsure what to do, Wodak contacted Lynn Kanuka. “I could tell that she wasn’t enjoying running,” she says, and began coaching her protegee. “She needed to love to run again.”

Wodak also met someone else, Dr. Alan Baggoo, an orthopedic surgeon in North Vancouver. “On one of our first dates he even offered to look at a MRI I had done,” says Natasha. Baggoo identified that she needed surgery, had osteoarthritis, with a bone fragment chipped off.

Throughout 2017, Kanuka told Tasha “just run free and easy,” with mild workouts, including light fartleks and pickups. “We waited for her body to respond,” Kanuka says, “and it did.” During this rebuilding phase Wodak also began working to address her anxiety. “If she’s able to enjoy what she’s doing, she can keep those negative voices at bay.”

The new outlook was working. Wodak represented Canada again at the 2017 World Championships in London, placing a respectable 16th in the 10,000m. She followed that in 2018 with a Commonwealth Games appearance in Australia. In 2019, Wodak dominated the Pan Am Games 10,000m, winning gold, and then later that year ran the World Championships in Doha, Qatar, placing 17th overall. “We were having fun and we were successful,” she says. “I realized I could do it a different way.”

Wodak seemed destined for another shot at running an Olympic 10,000m final in Tokyo. In January 2020, she set a new Canadian half-marathon record,

// She can put herself in a deep, dark place—and handle it.”



What if I don't have a coach, how do I train? By Brainsport

Determine your ultimate goal of running. Is it to gain fitness, improve one's own health, train for a specific race, or run for improved mental health? The reasons why people run vary greatly, but knowing why a person runs will determine how intense a person's running program should be. Does a person just want to complete the distance or do they want to race the distance? Does running easy a few times per week provide improvements towards good mental health? Determine three levels of goals towards your running race such as an A, B, C goal approach. The C is the easiest level that should be easily attained with training. The B goal is

more difficult and the A goal is the most difficult—but still achievable. Writing down each level of goals will make you more accountable. As a beginner runner going into first year university, I knew little about running since I never had a coach in high school. I found other people my ability level and started running with them. I asked questions and started journaling. Then I started reading articles about running from accomplished coaches. If you don't have a coach, seek out good information online and find others who you can learn from at running clinics, running groups or running shoe stores. brainsport.ca

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I want to show young Canadian women that we're going to fight internationally for the top 10. We're not going to participate. I go to compete."

and seemed primed to run very fast that summer. Then came COVID-19.

Wodak's Marathon Project

Wodak heard about the Marathon Project, a one-off event to be held in Arizona in December specifically for elite distance runners to have a shot at running an Olympic qualifying standard.

Kanuka had never run a marathon, and Wodak had only previously run about 140K a week at her peak, far less than the typical elite marathoner. "The first marathon she was hurt, but did well," says Kanuka. "We decided that the second marathon would be a different experience."

Wodak leaned heavily on her running community friends: Lyndsay Tessier, who finished ninth at the 2019 World Championship marathon; Lanni Marchant, who doubled in the 10,000m and marathon at the 2016 Olympics; Krista DuChene, who ran the marathon in Rio at 39; and Dayna Pidhoresky, who had qualified for Tokyo in 2019. She also began training periodically with Malindi Elmore, whom Wodak had raced back in high school. Elmore grabbed the second of three Olympic marathon spots just before the pandemic hit, running a Canadian record 2:24:50 in Houston at age 39. As Wodak was running workout PBs, she realized that she was now a different runner. "I felt healthy, like a new Natasha," she says.

In Arizona, Wodak was one of the surprise performers, finishing in 2:26:19, and making it look relatively effortless. It qualified her for the Tokyo Olympics.

The Quarantine Games

Everything about the 2020 Tokyo Olympics was disorienting. There would be no fans allowed on course, creating a somber, post-apocalyptic mood. When Wodak arrived at the Canadian team hotel in Sapporo, she was tested and ushered up to her room, passing by a security guard stationed on her floor to ensure she and other athletes would not leave, save for a sanctioned daily run in the immediate area. Luckily, Malindi Elmore's room was next door. "We're compatible," says Elmore.

"Process oriented, patient, and both of us liked keeping things fun."

Wodak felt an added comfort knowing she was going to toe the line with Elmore, who she lovingly refers to as "Mamma Malindi." "The plan was we'd stay together for the first half, and then every woman for herself."

For the first 20K, both Wodak and Elmore ran with a large group of athletes carefully doling out their effort. Then, Elmore made a move, and gapped Wodak at the halfway mark. "I could have panicked," says Wodak, "but I stayed calm; by 25K, I was passing people, too." Elmore maintained her lead all the way to the finish line, coming in ninth overall, but Wodak was less than a minute behind in 2:31:41, placing 13th. Besides powerhouse Kenya (which won gold and silver), Elmore and Wodak were the best performing duo in the race. "Natasha is one of the most feisty athletes I know," says Elmore. "She can put herself in a deep, dark place and handle it, and that's a rare ability."

In the end, Wodak and Elmore spent an evening in the Olympic Village before their abbreviated Games experience came to an end. "Out of nowhere, Malindi looked at me and said, 'So, Paris. Let's go to Paris,'" Wodak recalls. Elmore thought they had more to give. "The thought is, 'Let's gracefully move on from the sport.' But why? We're still running our absolute best," Elmore says. "Why should we be defined by a number on our birth certificates? I don't know what we're capable of, why impose these artificial barriers?"

What Comes After the End?

Shortly after Tokyo, Kanuka told Wodak that she would be retiring. "This sport, which I love, has governed my life since I was 18," Kanuka says. "I wanted to experience other things. It wouldn't have been fair to her."

Trent Stellingwerff became her new coach. The noted exercise physiologist had worked with Wodak at Athletics Canada, leveraging his research findings to prepare distance runners for



various aspects of performance, including the heat of Doha and Tokyo. "Trent is a scientist, so I've been learning a lot," Wodak says, "but he's a feminist too. We talk easily about emotions."

Wodak's twin goals for the three year gap between Games were to lower Elmore's national record of 2:24:50, and then position herself to qualify for Paris. "It's a massive jump when you're at the pointy end of the performance curve," says Stellingwerff of getting an athlete from 2:26 to 2:24 and beyond. "That said, Natasha is a diligent athlete and student of the sport."

Although Wodak now does most of her training on her own, she's become a part of a loose network of world-beating athletes affiliated with Stellingwerff, including Gabriela DuBues-Stafford, who now lives and trains in Victoria. Wodak also reunited with ASICS in 2021, with the brand paying her a living wage and offering her what she describes as "the most support she's ever received," and Wodak is also now adopting Stellingwerff's patient, methodical approach, even if she doesn't achieve her primary goals. A case in point was the 2022 Boston Marathon, Wodak's first marathon under his guidance.

"Boston beat me up," Wodak says with a laugh. She ran the first few kilometres in the large lead pack, along with Malindi Elmore. But Wodak



faded to a 19th place finish. “You can fake an 800m on a bad day, but you can’t in a marathon,” says Stellingwerff. Wodak, however, says her new approach allowed her to rebound quickly, physically and mentally.

“As a veteran athlete, I didn’t pout, and I’m proud of that,” she says.

Record-Breaking Berlin

Wodak did most of her training in the Glen Valley area of Langley, B.C. throughout the spring and summer of 2022. “Everything was clicking,” says Wodak. “Lynn came out for a lot of sessions, and I felt surrounded by a great team. I knew what I was doing.”

One adjustment that Stellingwerff has made to Wodak’s approach is to practice everything in advance—eating three hours beforehand, having a race day temperature plan, preparing for jet lag, mimicking the course in training, rehearsing the pre-race and on-course fuelling, and having a detailed race plan. That night, she was able to quiet her mind and, on race day, Wodak followed her well-rehearsed plan. After the gun sounded, she settled into a controlled (but very fast) 2:24 pace. Things were clicking. At 25K, Wodak was feeling oddly energetic and relaxed. By the time she hit 30K, Wodak knew she was running the

race of her life.

“I went 16:37 and 16:36 for my last two 5Ks. I was sprinting through the city of Berlin,” she says. “The marathon is so often about patience, patience, patience, but there are moments when you feel good—feel like you’re flying. I’ll always treasure those moments.”

Wodak finished in 2:23:12, running the second half of the marathon over a minute faster than the first 21.1K. She lowered the Canadian record by one minute, thirty-eight seconds.

From Budapest to Paris

Stellingwerff says Natasha ran 75 seconds faster than his outside prediction. “I respect the beast that is the marathon perhaps too much. There’s a large emotional and confidence piece that plays a big role in performance. The link is stronger than we know.”

After an illness derailed her plan to run London this past spring, Wodak had to be strategic in how she would approach the next 12 months in order to qualify for the 2024 Paris Olympics, but also have the time to properly prepare for her end goal. So, she decided to run the World Athletics Championship marathon in Budapest this past August. Both Stellingwerff and Wodak felt she was in the shape of her life, perhaps capable of

2:22:30 in ideal conditions. But it was hot on the start line. “Budapest was a good day, just not my best day,” says Wodak, who finished 15th place in 2:30:09. “The bigger picture is that I hopefully showed young Canadian women that we’re going to fight internationally for the top 10. We’re not going to participate. I go to compete.”

To qualify for Paris, she now must run under the qualifying time of 2:26:50, and also be one of the three fastest Canadian women during the qualifying window. (Her Tokyo teammate Malindi Elmore opted to skip the World Championships and instead qualified for Paris in Berlin.)

“It’s all about Paris,” says Wodak, who says she’s leaning towards either running the Houston Marathon in January, or the Tokyo Marathon in March. Meanwhile, Wodak has also started working with a small group of athletes in a coaching capacity. “They’re all running PBs,” she says. “It’s what I’ll do when I’m done competing. It comes down to surrounding yourself with the right people. We call ourselves Fierce Athletics.”

And what if Wodak doesn’t qualify for a third Games in 2024? Wodak was surprisingly positive. “If Paris doesn’t work out, I’ll go to Berlin and try to run a new Canadian record,” she says. “I can’t be disappointed in myself if I give it my all. Whatever happens, I’m looking forward to what’s next.” 🐾

Sound Mind, Sound Body, Sound Earth

When choosing ASICS, you're supporting a brand entrenched with the world

Working with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, ASICS has determined the carbon emission of every stage of their GEL-KAYANO 30 production chain. Robert Fay, Senior Manager of Merchandising at ASICS, says more than 90% of their new running shoes in 2021, 2022 and 2023 contain recycled materials and that the GEL-Nimbus 25 and GEL-Kayano 30, their two leading trainers, utilize FF BLAST™ PLUS ECO cushioning, which is made with approximately 20% bio-based content. “Sustainability is a cornerstone of ASICS brand values and we’ve always been focused on sound mind/sound body as a brand—sound earth naturally follows—so it’s always been very intentional that we do right by our environment, but I should mention our Metaspeed SKY won two Olympic

Gold medals in Tokyo while featuring a 100% recycled upper material. We’re not sacrificing anything to do the right thing.”

Doing the right thing, in a climate of forest fires, global warming, floods and carbon emission, is incumbent upon every global citizen, but runners, perhaps, almost feel more connected to our environment. Health, for ourselves, our community and our children, is tantamount to a runner’s way of life. Bob Fay, a runner, articulates the ASICS mission very well.

“Since our founding in 1949, our purpose has been to help people achieve a Sound Mind, Sound Body. But in order to achieve Sound Mind, Sound Body, we need a sound earth to run on. At ASICS, we’re taking action—reducing carbon emissions, embracing recycled materials

and using less resources—to bring the benefits of movement to the world we love to run on.”

ASICS now has a new carbon footprint label on select shoes and uses a sunflower icon on their apparel, on garments containing leftover material (or at least 50% material) from textile waste. Runners should be conscious of the brand values behind the gear and shoes they choose. Eco-friendly shoe technologies, sacrificing nothing for comfort and speed, are behind everything sold with the ASICS logo. “ASICS is proud to provide runners of all abilities performance footwear while utilizing sustainable materials and manufacturing processes,” he says. “We’re excited about what’s next and by working to reduce our carbon footprint, we’ll positively impact the broader industry and the world.”

How do I know if I should switch up my stride? By Strides (of course!)



Your running stride will naturally change with your fitness, the surface that you are running on and with distance but that occurs organically. Most of us do not cognitively think about changing our cadence or stride length during our runs. Switching up your running stride is not something you should do lightly, as it can lead to injury if not done correctly. However, there are certain situations where it might be necessary or beneficial to make changes to your running stride. **Injury:** your current stride might be putting too much stress on specific muscles or joints and switching up your stride and cadence may relieve some of the pain.

Inefficiency: If you’re not making the progress you’d like to in terms of speed, endurance, or overall performance, a change in your running form might help. Getting a gait analysis done by a biomechanics specialist will help facilitate any changes.

Transition to a Different Distance: If you’re transitioning from shorter to longer distances, you might need to adjust your stride to accommodate the different demands on your body. I fall into the camp of “run the way it doesn’t hurt for you” and this will mean something different for each runner. Also to note, changes do not occur overnight and you will want to start with small adjustments and evaluate. [Stridesrunning.com](https://www.stridesrunning.com)

GEL-KAYANO 30



GEL-NIMBUS 25



METASPEED SKY



By the Numbers

More than **90%** of new running shoes in 2021, 2022, and 2023 contain recycled materials.

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Metaspeed SKY, which won 2 Olympic Gold medals in Tokyo, featured a **100%** recycled upper material.



What do I do after my race? By Forerunners

After a buildup to a fall race and a peak performance there are several things to consider in the weeks ahead, before any thoughts or plans for your next race target. First: review how the race went. Did you execute accordingly to plan? Was pacing correct (considering race conditions and your fitness)? Did you fuel properly (considering race distance and weather)? Did you achieve your goal? Spend some down time (call it an "active rest") for three weeks following the race. Run about 50% of

peak volume—easier and unstructured. In the active rest period, run low intensity, vary surfaces and don't measure (or care) how far you are running. If you feel inclined, do some cross-training, preferably non-weight bearing and as unstructured as possible.

Then, after an active rest period, you will feel refreshed—both physically and mentally and ready to train for new races and goals. Assuming you are healthy, physically and mentally refreshed, now it's time to plan your next schedule and plan for your next race. forerunners.ca





Photograph, top left, of Lanni Marchant, Silvia Ruegger and Krista DuChene at the 2013 Toronto Waterfront Marathon.

Like a Girl

Recent studies reveal that women's participation in sports is dwindling. But by creating a supportive, educated, and inclusive environment, we can change the narrative that physical activity is a boys' club. Here's how.

We know that you're no stranger to the thrill, accomplishment, and exhilaration that accompanies completing a challenging run—you wouldn't be reading this if you weren't. But when you're so immersed in the running community, it can be easy to forget that not everyone—women especially, according to recent surveys—experiences the rush of endorphins brought on by exercise on a regular basis. In fact, women's participation in sports appears to be dwindling all the way from teenage years up to

adulthood—and the barriers keeping them from joining in might surprise you.

Self-Consciousness a Key Factor

A 2023 International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity study found that there were five main areas that were preventing women from participating in sports and fitness. Perhaps hand in hand, body image concerns and societal beauty standards ranked high on the list, with time constraints due to juggling multiple

roles, their religious identity, and safety issues also coming into play.

These sentiments were echoed in a panel held by the Canada Running Series last summer, which featured a discussion on the barriers women face in participating in the TCS Toronto Waterfront Marathon. A whopping 89% of women reported that their mindset was what held them back the most, with 32% citing lack of time due to career and family commitments, while 18% felt unable to participate because of women's health-related issues. Overall, the group found that from 2019 to 2022, women's participation in the marathon dropped from 32% to 28%. Body image and mindset play a large role in what's keeping women from engaging in physical activity, and it's no wonder when most women are inundated with images of long, lean running influencers courtesy of social media. Let's face it: Diversity in runners' body types just isn't what women are seeing every time they take a scroll through social, and logic would tell them that if they don't look that way, there might not be a place for them in the running community. But dietician and running coach Cortney Berling thinks nothing could be further from the truth. She advises on body image concerns via her Instagram page, @eatwell.runbetter, and says, "It's important to keep in mind that there's no specific look that makes you a runner." While she does acknowledge that it's undeniable that the pros look a certain way, a dose of perspective will do you good. "It's partly their genetic make-up, and partly a body that's achieved from decades of training," she says.

Do I need special shoes to run in the winter? By BlackToe Running

BLACKTOE
RUNNING INC.

Besides key pieces like sweat-wicking base layers, a jacket, thermal tights, and gloves, we also recommend investing in a pair of winter running shoes. These shoes have several features that will help you conquer winter running safely and comfortably: **Improved Grip.** Winter shoes typically have special treads, lugs, rubber, and other components that provide improved traction on slippery surfaces. **/ Water Resistance.** Nobody wants to run with wet feet! Winter shoes are made with waterproof or water-resistant materials, such as a Gore-Tex upper, to keep your toes dry. **/ Added Warmth.** Many winter shoe models feature an extra layer of thermal material to provide warmth, while targeted airflow

zones help with breathability. **/ Visibility.** You'll often see reflective strips or very bright colours on winter shoes to help make runners more visible throughout the dark months. **/ Most winter running shoes fit and feel the same as models you are already familiar with.** So, if you regularly run in a pair of ASICS, you can feel confident that a pair of ASICS winterized running shoes will suit you just fine. But with so many options available, it can be fun to test out something new! Stop by your local running specialty store (like BlackToe Running!) for a top-shelf selection and expert advice on getting the best pair of winter running shoes for your needs—and get ready to own your winter runs! blacktoerunning.com

Instead, she encourages the idea of approaching activity with a “body neutrality” mindset—that is, acknowledging what your body does rather than what it looks like. “Focus on the things your body allows you to do,” she says. “Finding gratitude for your body and discovering joy in movement will help you embrace the gifts you have.” Try employing this idea by using statements such as “My body allowed me to run 5K today” or “I felt the freedom of movement during my sprint.”

Growing Up Sedentary

Women's lack of participation extends further than just marathons—and adult-aged women. While organized sports were on hold during the pandemic for everyone, Canadian Women and Sport discovered some concerning statistics post-pandemic for adolescent girls. According to its findings, one in four girls who participated in sport were not planning to return post-pandemic. And when compared to the boys, the results were staggering: By age 16, one in three girls dropped out of sports, whereas only one in ten boys did the same. Not only does this trend mean that opportunities for socialization and community are decreased, but it also diminishes avenues for physical and mental health support. What's more, it may be an important look at what's contributing to a reported 84% of adult women who don't participate in sports at all.

New Research

For the ones who do regularly participate in sports, it doesn't mean it's easy sailing. When it comes to women's health, a lack of research and education may be contributing to drop-out rates. For example, current Canadian guidelines recommend pregnant women exercise at a moderate intensity for 150 minutes per week. For a woman who's invested heavily in fitness



RUNNING DOWN A DREAM: Across Canada, races are doing more to make events more inclusive, including on-course lactate stations, equal prize money and encouraging the likes of Sawyer Nicholson, bottom left, 12-year-old local phenom.

or training for a marathon, these recommendations won't cover the intensity or duration she's used to—or required to continue committing to in order to achieve her goals. But the problem is that because of long-standing theoretical concerns in the medical community when it comes to studying higher levels of intense physical activity in pregnant women, researchers have been prevented from finding real, concrete answers as to whether or not more intense exercise is actually harmful—or helpful.

Luckily, at least for this barrier to women's fitness, science is starting to catch up—and Canada is leading the charge. A University of Alberta study was recently published in *Sports Medicine Journal* that found short bursts of intense physical activity during pregnancy is

actually safer than previously thought. HIIT and sprint lovers rejoice.

So far, Canada is one of the only countries that allows research in pregnant women working out a maximal heart rate. And while these findings won't be enough to warrant changing guidelines completely, it is a positive step in the right direction to spurring on the medical community to question outdated theories relating to women's health. Dr. Milena Forte, a family physician at Mount Sinai Hospital and associate professor at the University of Toronto, believes this study is integral to shifting the narrative. “I think sedentary behaviour is what we need to start thinking about as causing harm, not physical activity,” she told CBC reporters. One small step for medicine, one giant leap for women in sports. 🐾

How do I dress for the cold? By Frontrunners



When training in cold weather there are so many factors. It can be a damp cold like on the west coast or a dry freezing temperature in the Prairies. My recommendation is always layering. Starting nice and bundled and having the ability to shed layers as you warm up. It's important to keep the muscles and joints warm to help them moving smoothly. For the west coast, we recommend a nice light base layer, then covered with a long sleeve, often a half zip for more flexibility and then either a light wind/water resistant jacket or vest to keep you dry and the wind and rain off of you. The next best thing you

can wear is gloves and hat/toques. Keeping your hands warm will help to keep your arms and shoulders relaxed. Just something as simple as gloves can help reduce fatigue caused by being cold and shivering and it's an easy accessory to remove and stow in a pocket if you are too warm. This also goes for a hat or toque.

Keeping your head warm can keep your face and shoulders relaxed and help you retain heat lost through the top of your head. Running isn't easy and running in the cold is even tougher, so wearing the right gear to help you get out the door and feeling comfortable is crucial to your running success! frontrunners.ca



Addressing Iron Deficiency in Female Endurance Athletes

How to Fuel Your Long-Term Success

By Cara Kasdorf

Iron deficiency is more prevalent in female endurance athletes than in the general population. Some studies estimate that 15-35% of female endurance athletes are iron deficient and I find that to be true in my sport nutrition practice. When I first start working with female athletes, they often either haven't had blood work completed recently or are struggling to keep their iron levels up. Iron is a vital mineral for athletes, as it plays a pivotal role in carrying oxygen to muscles and tissues. Without adequate iron, your body can't produce enough hemoglobin, the protein responsible for transporting oxygen in your blood. Female athletes are at higher risk of iron deficiency due to: increased red blood cell turnover; iron losses from increased sweating; gastro-intestinal bleeding resulting from high training load; acute exercise induced inflammation; and blood losses from menstruation.

Ferritin is the storage form of iron and is considered one of the best indicators of iron status. The cut-off points for ferritin levels for athletes vary but general consensus is that ferritin levels should be above 30-40 mcg/L. Endurance and aerobic capacity may be affected when ferritin levels are below these levels.

Some of the common signs and symptoms of iron deficiency I see in my practice include: increased fatigue, reduced fitness and plateaus in training, restless legs, and poor sleep.

Female athletes should test ferritin and other markers of iron deficiency at least two to four times per year in order to monitor changes throughout training. These tests can be ordered through your family doctor.

A few key changes to the types of food you consume and the timing of iron intake can make a significant difference to your iron levels.

Animal sources of iron are best absorbed and include foods such as lean meat and seafood. Plant-based sources of iron include: beans, lentils, dark leafy greens, and fortified cereals. Plant-based sources of iron are not as well absorbed, so including vitamin C-rich foods like oranges, strawberries, and bell peppers can enhance iron absorption.



Coffee and tea inhibit the absorption of iron, so wait to sip on that latte or americano for 1-2 hours before or after you eat an iron-rich meal or take a supplement.

In some cases, you may find it challenging to meet your iron needs through food alone, especially if you're training intensely or recovering from iron deficiency. In such instances, iron supplements are critical. However, don't just start popping iron supplements in the hopes that it will help performance. Too much iron from supplements can result in gastrointestinal disturbances, and even cause organ toxicity. Before starting a supplement, get blood work done and speak with your doctor or dietitian about the correct dose and type of supplementation for your specific needs.

The bottom line: iron deficiency in female endurance athletes is preventable and treatable so don't let it hold you back from reaching your running goals!

Cara Kasdorf is a Registered Dietitian who works with runners and endurance athletes across Canada. Learn more about her practice at: www.blueprintnutrition.ca and follow her on Instagram @blueprintnutritionsport



For more information about solutions for iron deficiency, please join us on October 23rd, at The Runners Shop in Toronto at 6:30 pm. The event is free, but space is limited, Reserve your spot here: <https://www.eventbrite.com/o/irun-magazine-ferosom-forte-71926323373>

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130 Years, and Brand New

The Around the Bay Race celebrates its 130th Birthday with Innovation

No other race in Canada is as iconic as Around the Bay, and few races from around the world could possibly compare. First run in 1894, Around the Bay (ATB as it's known, for short), is 30 kilometres run up and down the Hamilton hills, and its windblown bucket list adventure has been braved by such athletes as Tom Longboat, Lanni Marchant and Jack Caffery.

This year, with a new finish line at Tim Hortons Field, and distances available at 5K, 10K and 15K—opening up history to more runners—Anna Lewis, the race director since 2015, says she's optimistic that the current running boom will be welcomed to Hamilton with loud cheers, and open arms.

"We know this historic race means a lot to our community, volunteers and runners from all over the world, and we want to honour our past while also starting new traditions and sharing our Steeltown pride," says Lewis, adding she finds it extremely rewarding watching athletes of every variety achieve their goals at her finish line. "We're using our anniversary year to celebrate what's been achieved so far, making history, and also positioning ourselves for what's next."

Around the Bay is the oldest long distance road race in North

America and past participants give each other a knowing nod when spotting each other in their famous Older Than Boston long-sleeved shirts. From the famous Grim Reaper at the top of Valley Inn Hill, a rite of passage at 26K, to the vocal course support banging their pots and pans, the event raises thousands of dollars each year for St. Joseph's Healthcare and is a highlight of the running year. With a new course, new distances, new medal and new finish line, Lewis says that ATB, at 130, is only getting better with age.

"What's old is what's new again," Lewis says, with a smile. "We're keeping the elements that people know and love, but I also think our refresh is fun and exciting."

We know that road races are seeing attendance spikes all over the country and we know that many new runners will be considering their race this spring. Around the Bay has been challenging runners longer than any other distance event in North America. It's a chance to become part of history, one kilometre at a time.

For more information on Around the Bay this March 24 in Hamilton, please see bayrace.com, and please remember that race bibs sell out every year.

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Closing the Gender Gap in Sport

We know that women exercise significantly less than men.

What we need to find out is what can be done.

Fiona Berwick has spent an inordinate amount of time studying data. As head of Global Communications at ASICS, metrics and pie charts are her bread and butter, and she needs information to decide which direction to steer her team. After four years of circumnavigating the earth and speaking with runners, she's decided enough is enough: sports women need the same opportunities as their male counterparts.

"Exercise is more than just a benefit for the body, it's also a huge benefit for the mind," says Berwick, who last month wrapped the Move Every Mind survey, which featured over 25,000 global voices addressing the gender exercise gap. The survey was open to everyone, there was no criteria on who responded, and the intention was to understand respondents' relationship with exercise—not just for now, but over a lifetime. Looking at facilitators and barriers, ASICS is creating a qualitative and quantitative gender analysis and Berwick says her company's involvement in the world around them dates back to the brand's founding in 1949.

"When you move physically, you move your mind and this is our focus," says Berwick, adding that it's long been known that the exercise gap exists. Women and girls don't get into sports at the same rate as their male counterparts and, if they do, they're more likely to drop out than men. Societal pressures, inordinate amount of time spent caretaking, a dearth of role models and unequal athletic media coverage are some of the reasons often trotted out as factors behind the disparity. But what Berwick is attempting—at an unprecedented global scale—is pinpointing solutions. Like ASICS take on the environment, Berwick says her company must be global citizens in addition to making great running shoes and gear. "Our post-pandemic research conclusively uncovered the direct link between activity levels and mental benefits and it's incumbent upon us all to make sure these benefits are equally parsed," said Berwick, whose intentionally crafted survey featured such questions as "Do you find girls often drop out / stop doing sport / regular exercise as they grow up?"

And: "Why do you think it is?" (With a drop down menu, including: "It gets too competitive," and "Teachers don't encourage them.")

"These aren't new observations," continues Berwick, "what is new is our data-driven desire to find answers."

Many of our readers will have already taken the survey and all of our readers will have thoughts. Results, says Berwick, will be revealed at the start of next year and the conversation will be carried beyond a sales cycle. This is not a marketing ploy, says Berwick. As long as the issue persists and inequality is the status quo, ASICS will address the exercise gap, search for solutions, and use its resources to make meaningful change.

"The exercise gender disparity has been here for a long time and we're not going to find the solution overnight, there's no magic bullet," Berwick says, "but to create a robust long-term plan, we need to hear from wide-ranging voices and not put off what we know is essential: an equalizing impact on mental and physical health of all genders, and to do so on a global scale." 🐾

How do you stay motivated to run all year long? By Le Coureur Nordique



Joining a club will allow you to socialize while practicing your sport. Trying to play the tourist is also good advice and vary your routes to discover new places. It makes the time pass more quickly and prevents you from comparing your times from one occasion to another. In the fall, if you want to love running, we suggest investing in proper clothing. A base layer, an insulating layer, insulated windproof pants, and a wind- and rain-resistant coat that will also serve you well in the winter. Adding a waterproof and more grippy shoe to your collection will help you keep your feet secure during your snow runs. In the winter, to fully enjoy this beautiful season, opt for variety.

Make use of the snowy days to go cross-country skiing, backcountry skiing, and bring out your racing snowshoes. Le Coureur Nordique specializes in racing snowshoes. We've developed a step-in system in collaboration with the company TSL, integrated directly into your shoe, which allows you to attach the snowshoe without straps. Diversifying your activities ensures that you'll be excited to run more when the spring days arrive. And don't worry, you won't have lost anything. On the contrary, your body and mind will have had the necessary rest for optimal preparation for your early-season races. lecoureurnordique.ca



I love to run, but should I diversify my exercise? By Bushtukah



Winter is a great time to switch up the pace and take up Nordic skiing, Fat Biking, and even SnowShoe Running. All of these provide great cross training benefits during the off season that will have runners feeling stronger for their next season. Nordic skiing mimics running the closest without the pounding on the joints. You will strengthen different leg muscles as well as your upper body that will improve your balance and form. This extra strength can also help prevent injuries when you're back on the road. Another great benefit is the possibility of increasing your aerobic capacity. By engaging both the upper and lower body you will be improving your V02 max which will help you hit

those longer distances sooner. Fat Biking has been a fast-growing activity for runners and cyclists alike. It allows you to explore more trail networks while working on your strength, balance and power. SnowShoeing has evolved into sub-categories over the years and SnowShoe Running has become one of our favourites. The snow shoes are smaller and lighter and can be used with a good pair of waterproof trail shoes. The pace is roughly 2 min/km slower than on the road, but you'll get your heart rate up. The stride is a bit different so you'll be activating different muscle groups. Enjoy!! shop.bushtukah.com



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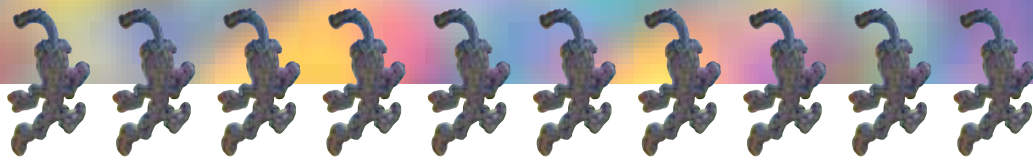
In 1975, 143 men and 3 women took to the start line of the inaugural Ottawa Marathon on May 25. Starting and finishing at Carleton University, the runners in cloth race bibs and non-technical gear, could not have known that they would be the pioneers of a half century of racing in the Nation's Capital.

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The Good Stuff Happens on the Other Side of the Comfort Zone

What we gain when we commit to racing

When I was in grade 11, I wanted to be a French teacher. Then I got a summer job as a French camp counselor and realized that I wasn't French enough to be a French teacher. The reality was that when a child stuck their hand close to the campfire, I would yell, "get your hand out of the fire," instead of the French equivalent! And so I began my quest for my teachable subject. This is where the irony began. Ms Bondi was my math teacher and my track coach. Not only did she convince me to pursue a career in mathematics, but she also convinced me that I could run track and get high marks at the same time. In fact, in grade 13 Calculus, she had me NOT study for a test just to convince me that I could balance sport and academics. She would drop the test if I didn't get my usual grade. Thankfully, I kept on running, I got my scholarship to university, and I learned how to balance

athletics and academics. In 1992, I was officially a math teacher. I had no idea that that would evolve into a career as a professional triathlete.

In 1999, having raced as a professional triathlete at multiple World Championships, the Pan Am Games and Ironman—and after 7 years as a math and computer science teacher—I resigned to pursue sport full-time. My mother was horrified. Teaching is an honorable profession. She could not understand how I would get any fulfillment or have any impact as an athlete. Moms are usually right. But it wasn't until I won my second Ironman in 2001 that I felt a bit uneasy with my career choice as well.

I crossed the finish-line, and the win felt a bit empty. Winning an Ironman is not easy, and it was to be celebrated and yet, I felt hollow. Clearly, I needed more than a "win." I looked inside my heart and recalled the Serenity Prayer.

"Grant me the serenity to accept the things that cannot change, the courage to change the things that can be changed and the wisdom to know the difference." I looked deeper. There was a reason I was winning races. And I asked myself, "What am I going to do with that win?"

Sport had taught me to love myself as myself with all of my imperfections. It had developed my self esteem and my confidence. It had brought me both joy and sadness, but made me alive. When I did triathlon, I felt like a loved member of the triathlon community. I knew that I needed to share sport with as many people as possible so that they could have that same growth and feel that same sense of joy. Purpose at last!! But that was only half of my mission.

I was winning races despite having Cystic Fibrosis—a genetic lung disease that causes chronic lung infections, lung damage and



ultimately early death. That wasn't a coincidence. Sport could be my platform to deliver hope to families with CF. They could see that their child could be healthy and active just like me. Moreover, they could see that sport would keep their lungs healthy, enhance their self worth and make them feel alive and vibrant. I remember being on intravenous medication for 5 weeks once-upon-a-time. I administered the medicine via IV 4 times per day every 6 hours. But for one hour each day, I would ride my bike inside or go for a jog. And for that one hour each day, I didn't feel as if I had CF. Sport made me alive and so happy. That message was my mission. At last, thanks to that soul searching emptiness from my second Ironman win, I found my purpose and the fuel for my career.

I firmly believe that I would never have raced 33 Ironman races and I would never have won 11 Ironman races without CF. And that is a bold statement from someone who uses her lungs as her engine. But CF became my superpower and triathlon was the vehicle to encourage others to embrace sport and find new life and inspire them to re-create themselves. Now as a coach, I know the power of sport. The best prescription for anxiety and sadness is a pair of running shoes. Running shoes are the gateway to adventure, fulfillment, and purpose. They provide a scary journey outside of the comfort zone, but the good stuff happens on the other side of the



**I love my sport
because it has literally
changed my life.**

Lisa Bentley

Author, *An Unlikely Champion*
11-time IRONMAN Champion
Triathlon Canada Hall of Fame
Etobicoke Sports Hall of Fame
www.lisabentley.com
www.AnUnlikelyChampion.com

comfort zone. It may be frightening to start, but it is more frightening to stay stuck in patterns that may not make you happy.

Yes, I love my sport because it has literally changed my life. When I feel afraid, I go back to the lessons learned in sport. If I could do "that" then I can do "this," NOW. I remember in 2005 when my appendix burst at the Ironman World Championships. I was being rolled into the operating room and I took a deep breath and I visualized myself on the start line of a race being calm. Having surgery was a different fear, but no different from the uncertainty of racing. I put myself in my happy place of racing and nailed the surgery jitters!

Sport makes me believe that I can handle anything. I can handle any disappointment. I can handle any curveball. I can handle any obstacle. I can problem solve. I can find a plan A, plan B and plan C. I can ask for help. I can find greatness in any adversity. No matter what life throws at me, sport has armed me with a skill set to rise to every obstacle and turn barriers into opportunities. And sport keeps my lungs healthy and strong which means that I am a thriving CF adult hopefully motivating other CF patients to embrace fitness and longevity. When we replace the "I" with a "WE," illness becomes wellness.

Ready. Set. Go. Let's run (and swim and ride and hike and play). 🐾

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