

## How an Embarrassing Incident Made Me a Runner



Had anyone told me 40 years ago that I would not only be running for pleasure but also racing competitively when I was 50, I wouldn't have believed them. For years I clung to the only athletic accomplishment I had ever achieved – a third place finish in the 3-legged race at age 7 when my partner, bound to me at the ankle by a pair of my mother's beige stockings, had literally picked me up, run 100 meters and successfully crossed the finish line ahead of two less coordinated teams whose ankle tie had come loose. It was perhaps a victory by default but at the time, I felt like an Olympian.

Despite that promising start, however, it did not appear that sports and particularly running were for me. In fact, the only time I ever ran was at our annual school sports day when I would consistently place last in the 100m, 200m and 400m sprints. I only competed in these races because I had no choice in the matter. Had it been up to me I would have been happy to just wander around the sports field, looking for daisies, buttercups or loose change. Based on how slowly I ran, many people thought I might actually be doing that anyway. Every year my mother bought me brand new gym shoes, black rubber slip-on plimsoles, which smelled like a car tire, hoping they might make a difference, but the problem apparently lay in my lack of talent, a problem for which I imagined there was no cure.

Fast forward to my first year at university. I was living in student halls of residence. Meals in the halls were provided and generally consisted of three courses, the third being dessert. Of course in Scotland, desserts did not consist of fresh fruit salad or baked apples, but leaned more toward the heart-stopping, artery clogging type - like sticky toffee pudding and trifle - comfort food at its finest. Meal times became a highlight of the day as my friends and I indulged in daily, unsanctioned eating contests, making sure all plates were cleared before they were returned to the kitchen. It just seemed wrong to waste good food!

At the end of my second year, I had a rude awakening. Hard at work on a project in the library, I heard a shriek "Oh, my God, Fiona, is that you?" Hesitant to acknowledge that I knew someone who would scream in a library, I waited before turning to see the identity of the shrieker. It was Rona, a high school friend. "I hardly recognized you" she continued, barely lowering her voice. "You gained so much weight." While I contemplated pretending I was not in fact the person she thought she recognized, I decided denying it would be futile although I knew the conversation was not headed in a pleasant direction. "You used to be so skinny," she continued. "You must have done nothing but eat since you got here." Rona then introduced me to her friend. Repeating how I once was small but now was large, she continued to shriek, "I can't believe it, Oh my God!" Unsure of how to respond to Rona's accusations of stuffing myself like a bear preparing for a long winter, I muttered something about having to catch a bus and left her standing there, mouth agape. As I left the building, tears streaming down my face, I realized she was right. I had let myself go. I had been overeating and I was fat.

I knew it was time to make some changes. I wasn't necessarily interested in getting in shape or

developing healthier eating habits. The sole focus was to lose weight and prove to Rona that I wasn't fat after all. The fundamentals of weight loss were easy to understand - eat less and move more. I decided that the easiest way to lose weight was to jog. I only needed to step out the door and run. How hard could it be? The first day I put on my running shoes, I waited until it was dark then ran a few laps around the halls of residence. It was by no means far and the route had the advantage of being a circle so that at any given time I was only a few minutes from base. While it was a long slow process, my plan eventually worked and my stretch jeans returned to being regular jeans.

The next year, I moved out of the temptation-filled halls of residence and moved into an apartment with three friends. When I mentioned to one of them, Bob, that I was considering going out jogging one evening, his eyes lit up and he offered to accompany me to "make sure I was safe." Robert was no novice like myself and he was more than happy to give me helpful pointers as we ran. He jogged sideways and backward, talking to me the whole time, more focused on how I was managing than on what was going on around him. We ran together several times. He always encouraged me to run a little harder and go a little farther, and I enjoyed having him there to push me to my limits.

Those sorties marked the beginning of the new me and before long I was able to call myself a runner. Nowadays, I can't imagine not running. While it can be difficult at times to find the motivation to take those first few steps, the next few steps are always easier and the sense of accomplishment that follows a run sets me up for the entire day. I enjoy my daily endorphin rush, I love leaving my comfort zone for a while and returning to it feeling stronger and healthier than before. Like most runners, I am addicted to the feeling of calm that follows a long run or a good speed work session and I am forever grateful to people like Rona and Robert who started me out on this path.