

Finishing may be just start

Jennifer Gish

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I could see the finish line from the top of the hill. All I had to do was let gravity suck me down Madison Avenue and I'd be done with this, the 3.5-mile Workforce Team Challenge, my first race.

My lungs were burning. It was that warm feeling you get when you gulp coffee too fast and you can feel it travel down your esophagus. Except my lungs weren't just warm. They were, say, right around the temperature of those ovens used by glass-blowers. I could feel my bronchial tubes shriveling.

Meanwhile, my brain had joined my lungs in meltdown mode.

"I hate running," I said to myself as my sneakers slapped against the road. "Why am I doing this? Why are any of us doing this? This is ridiculous. Nine thousand people are running down the street for no reason other than to run. People used to run with a purpose: To catch food or to avoid being food to large jungle cats. This is miserable. After the Freihofer's in a couple weeks, these legs will never race again. Ever."

I was not a runner in March when the organizers of the Freihofer's Run for Women asked if I'd consider being one of the "media personalities" they'd enlist to recruit and lead a team. They wanted to launch a 10-week training challenge to help women who didn't run prepare for the 5k on June 4, and if anyone was going to represent the nonathletic segment of society, I was their woman. (They never said this to me, but trust me, I was a match.)

I never had a desire to run, except for the time my toddler daughter toddled her way toward a busy two-lane. I'd just started going to a gym regularly in the fall after swearing for a decade that I wasn't a "gym person."

Now, here I was in the Workforce Team Challenge, a race I'd entered as a warm-up to the Freihofer's, a running person -- stuck in a pack of other running people -- who absolutely hated to run.

Like most people are with new, exciting things, I'd hit my training hard in those first few weeks. I dreamt of a 24-minute finishing time as I sweated through extra runs on the treadmill, trying to go beyond what the 400 of us started within the early weeks of our group training.

I worked out six days a week. I started looking at fitness watches with GPS capability. I bought new workout pants and shirts.

People were telling me I might be a natural, that I had a runner's build and a runner's mind-set. I was imagining my kids watching me finish a half-marathon next summer.

Then the "new" wore off, much like the bottoms of my overworked sneakers.

By week seven of the training, the group was up to 2.5 miles a session, but I wasn't doing so many extra credit runs anymore, cutting back to three or four workouts a week. Twenty-four minutes was no longer a race goal but how long I'd sleep past the alarm meant to wake me up for the gym. I was bored with all the songs on my MP3 player, and even Shakira couldn't will me through an extra mile. I would have rather eaten a bowl of Rocky Road than be out running on one. I had gone from a runner in the making to a fraud in new workout pants, and my hips didn't lie.

When the Workforce Team Challenge came around, I told people I'd be happy with 10-minute miles, a pace that could probably be walked by a man with long legs.

But tossed forward in the sea of runners, I found some motivation. Yes, I can get lazy, but my competitiveness never takes a break. I kept up with the people around me during the race, not wanting to slow to a walk and going as far as picking off other runners who were in front of me. I'd key in on the woman in the yellow T-shirt and then try to pass her, and play that game until the last half-mile when I decided that running is for suckers.

All along the course, I kept wondering where the runner's high was. I wasn't euphoric as I panted through Washington Park. Nothing about this was fun. I just wanted it to be over.

Then I reached the bottom of the hill where the huge digital clock at the finish line came into view. I'd crossed at 31:10, about four minutes faster than I'd expected.

As I searched for the nearest cup of water, I started thinking about how I could push a little harder at the Freihofer's. I figured with some extra training sessions I might be able to work my way down to 8 1/2-minute miles.

My lungs recovered as my pride swelled. Maybe finishing was the part that was supposed to feel good. Maybe that was the high.

I'll let you know for sure after the next race.

And maybe even the one after that.

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Freihofer's Run for Women

When: 10 a.m. Saturday

Where: Downtown Albany

Weather: Partly sunny, mid-60s

Info: <http://freihofersrun.com>

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