

Sunday Journal: Freeing her inner athlete takes more than a step

Rachel Eddey, Special to the Times

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Running has never been my strong point. By the age of 27, there were three instances in which I, as an adult, had run at will. There was the "escape from crazy ex-boyfriend" sprint, the "I'm late for my train, which will make me miss my flight" jog, and the "I'm alone on a deserted side street without my mace" trot. None was for the sake of running — certainly not for the pleasure of it. The closest I had ever come to competitive racing was dating an amateur sprinter.

So when my friend Regina recently dropped in casual conversation that I should join her for a half marathon hundreds of miles away from where we lived, I waited for the punch line. None came. We had been making plans for happy hour, and the prospect of a pink cocktail must have clouded her judgment.

"It will definitely be a good time," she declared. Every sedentary bone in my body doubted it.

With no aesthetic motivator (at 5-1 and 110 pounds, I'm not considered overweight by medical standards), the idea of exercise confused me. I never saw the allure in donning a sport bra, lacing up technical-looking sneakers and huffing down a trail. Though I considered smart eating habits and the occasional nature preserve hike a vital part of life, my commitment to health ended there. I joined the gym and considered the membership card a sign of vitality.

Regina's view differed greatly. A longtime athlete, she has completed four marathons and raised thousands of dollars for cancer research. In addition to two 10-mile solo jaunts during the week, she meets her running group — an informal medley of uber-motivated morning dwellers — every Saturday morning at 9 sharp. Thinking of her schedule exhausts me.

But the following day, as I sat in front of the television with a pint of ice cream, I couldn't shake the excitement at the thought of participating. I had conditioned myself to believe that I could run but chose not to, and training was an exotic alternative to renting DVDs or surfing the Internet. A few days of warm-up, I was sure, would prepare me to tackle long-distance lengths by the end of the week. With four months of preparation time, I assumed I had a good shot at winning the race.

I traded the ice cream for mesh shorts — stuck in the bottom dresser drawer among mismatched socks — and headed to the gym. The last time I had been there was to pay my yearly dues six months earlier. *Think of all the cute running clothes you can buy*, I told myself as I pulled open the now unfamiliar doors of the fitness center.

I didn't recognize most of the machines I passed on my way to the locker room. They looked foreboding, metal components and plastic knobs jutting out at awkward angles. Even the taped-on instructions looked foreign. But I was here, and that was half the battle.

I found my way to a treadmill, got acquainted with the speeds and inclines, and prepped myself for an hour's go at it. *This isn't rocket science*, I told myself. The only rule is to run.

I conked out after six minutes.

My face flushed for more than just the exertion as I sat down to rest.

I hadn't always been this way. I thought back to high school gym class, when I ran laps to avoid the alternative: failing what

was supposed to be an easy "A." I didn't consider tapering off after exhaustion set in because I didn't want to lower my grade-point average. Only now, with almost 10 years of lethargy weighing me down, did I begin to see I was failing far more than a class. Today, I couldn't run. What was in my future — an inability to walk?

I went back to the gym the next day, the next week and the next month. Though I wasn't the best or the fastest or the smoothest, I did start to see improvements in my performance. My breathing became steadier as I exhaled and straightened my shoulders. I could run a little bit longer, then a little bit harder. But the sign-up deadline was approaching, and 13.1 miles still seemed like a cross-country excursion.

I told Regina I wouldn't be joining her. Though the half marathon would be a great opportunity to travel and test myself, it was one I would have to earn. I had not only learned my limits over the past few weeks, but also what I could do to help overturn them.

And that would take more than a few days of training.

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