

# No Going Back

After a bumpy beginning, the author evolves as a runner. Despite herself

◆ KIM COOPER FINDLING

Not too long ago, I unwittingly moved to a town full of crazy people. In my neighborhood alone, there were Olympic swimmers, world-class skiers and snowboarders, even professional rock climbers. ◆ Pretty much everyone else I met just competed for fun, which meant they only ran 2 hours a day and entered several road races a year.

(They usually won.) Eventually I did find a few normal people in town. You know, housewives and stuff. They just did the occasional marathon.

My intense fear of any kind of pain or competition at first caused me to observe these people from dark corners. I was awed and intimidated.

Then I met my future husband. He took me to parties where I encountered these maniacs. They were, to my horror, his friends. They spoke of "training regimens," "time trials," "personal records," and other incomprehensible topics.

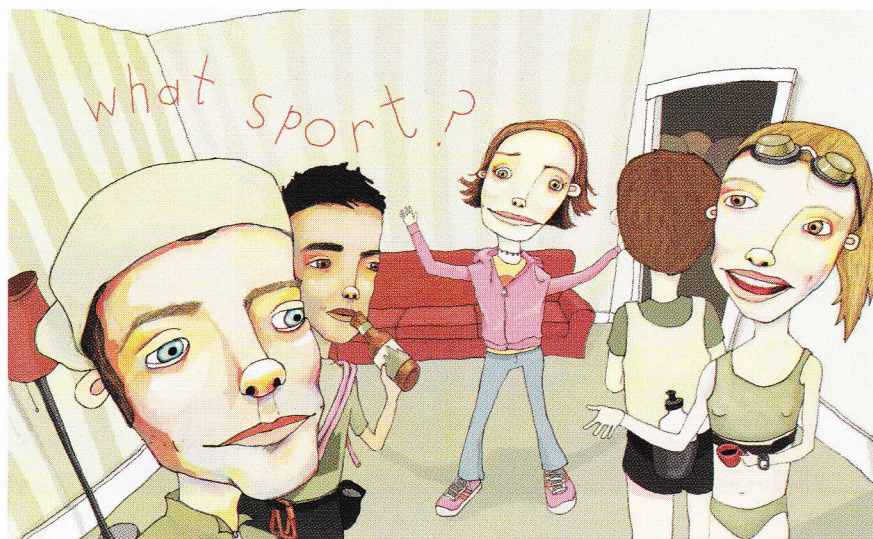
Then they would smile and ask me, "What do you do?" I'd begin telling them about my work only to realize a beat later that the question had actually been, "What sport do you do?"

Instead of doing the sensible thing and dumping my boyfriend on the spot to escape all this, I first tried to bolster my self-esteem with reassurances that I "had a life." Which meant occasionally eating nachos, drinking beer, and spending money on something other than sports gear. This ploy didn't work.

So I decided to find a sport.

My criteria: No lessons, no excessive gear requirements, no teams, no falling down. In the end, running was the obvious (actually, the only) choice. My first runs were to the end of the street and back, about a mile total. It was tough, but I didn't care, because the activity provided me with a passable answer to the "What do you do?" question.

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When some friends suggested that we all enter a 10-K trail race because it would be "fun," I replied: "Not me. I'm not competitive." But my future spouse soon got wind of it, and with his incessant Labrador retriever-like enthusiasm, he bit hard on the idea.

"I am not competitive! I am not! I am not competitive! I am not!" was all I could say to him. To which he calmly replied that I was a "natural," if only I would apply myself. Yeah, whatever.

I entered the damn race. My goal: to finish without dying. I did so, in under an hour. And I won a prize at the raffle. Later, I ate a greasy lunch and drank a beer to numb my sore and shaking body.

In the days and weeks afterward, I realized I had been tricked. My body now kept propelling itself out the door in the morning to run, evidently hooked on endorphins. I entered the same race the next year, and ran 3 minutes faster.

The third year, I ran the race another 3 minutes faster, and shocked everyone (espe-

cially myself) by taking second in my age-group. Looking at the woman who got first, I said to my husband, "She was right in front of me! I could have passed her!" At which

point he began jumping up and down and chanting, "My honey's com-pe-ti-tive . . . My honey's com-pe-ti-tive . . . !" No way, I thought. I still ate nachos and drank beer on a regular basis.

This year, my fifth as a runner, I ran that 10-K nearly 10 minutes faster than the first year. When I crossed the finish line, my husband was waiting for me. "Way to go! You are fast! Great job!"

Suddenly, I began weeping. I wept because I'd shaved another 3 minutes off my time, but knew I wasn't going to place that day. I wept because I knew there would come a race when I didn't improve. I wept because some runners finished a full 15 minutes ahead of me.

But mostly I wept because I knew it for sure: I cared. And there was no going back. **R**

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