

Keeping Running

By Rob Charry

Keeping running (and everything else) in perspective. Lynne Andersson was a good enough swimmer to place second in the 50 meter freestyle in the Georgia State High School meet as a teenager, and a good enough runner to win more than her share of 5K and 5 mile races in her 20's and 30's. But, seven years ago, her enormous drive and boundless energy was deeply tested.

A mother of two young daughters, and an outstanding achiever in academics and athletics, Andersson's life changed forever in 1999, when youngest daughter Zoe was born. Zoe's vertebrae didn't segment properly during development, and some of her upper vertebrae between her mid-back and neck were malformed or partly formed. Her ribs did not bud off properly during gestation period and she was born with only two lowest floating ribs on her left side. Placed on a ventilator and immediately transported to the Neonatal Intensive Care unit at Children's

Hospital, Zoe's future was quite uncertain. An orthopedic surgeon at CHOP steered the Anderssons to a group of orthopedic surgeons in San Antonio who developed an expandable titanium prosthetic for children with scoliosis. The hope was to build Zoe a whole chest wall using titanium rods, so eventually she could breathe on her own. Initially rejecting Zoe as a candidate for the surgery, the San Antonio doctors came north and did a rib transplant at CHOP, transferring one of her right ribs to her left side. Zoe, who was eight months old at the time, was able to leave the hospital for the first time, but remained on a ventilator and under 24 hour nursing care. Less than a year later, in a second operation in San Antonio, doctors inserted two titanium prosthetics into her chest wall. Medical opinion was divided though, as to whether she'd ever be strong enough to get off the ventilator.

Born in Washington D.C., Lynne Andersson grew up mostly in Georgia, the daughter of a cable TV pioneer who helped Ted Turner launch TV's first cable superstation, WTBS in Atlanta.



Lynne at the National Masters Cross Country Championship in Saratoga Springs



She was mainly a swimmer in high school, though she dabbled in track and field after swim season ended. At the University of North Carolina, she walked on the swim team, and was one of only eight students majoring in Biostatistics, which combined biology and environmental science with statistics, and involved doing research with public health issues. Originally a pre-med major, Biostatistics was her “fallback” major, when she realized she was more interested in getting the “full” college experience, rather than spending collegiate days and nights studying and swimming. By sophomore year, she joined a sorority and swimming began to take a backseat to the college “lifestyle.”

Lynne Anderson was far from a slacker in college. A degree in Bio-statistics is hardly a walk in the park. Upon graduating U.N.C., she landed a job as a Biostatistician in the Research Triangle Park area of North Carolina, doing statistical programming for a large non-profit public health firm. After a few years though, she found it unsatisfying and enrolled at Georgia Tech to get her MBA. It was then that she took up running, in part to lose weight. She quickly worked her way up to distance running and placed second in her age group (25-29)

in her first race, the Atlanta Half Marathon. At that point it dawned on her that she could become more than just a decent runner.

Things really took off for Andersson’s running career, so to speak, when she returned to UNC, to pursue her doctorate. “Everybody needs some form of procrastination when they’re doing their dissertation. One friend became an avid organic gardener, another a weightlifter, and another started getting all sorts of plastic surgery. I took up running with zealotry. Instead of working on my dissertation, I would train.” And train she did, with other procrastinating Ph.D. candidates, for the Shamrock Marathon in Virginia Beach, which she ran in under three and half hours, good enough to qualify for the Boston Marathon. “I was real happy, because at that point I didn’t even know about speed work, I just went out and ran.” Enter former U.N.C. runner, and Olympic hopeful, Joan Nesbitt. “I hooked up with her and other friends and they took me to the next level of running. She was very inspiring.” In one three-month period of training with her “new friends,” who convinced her of the importance of speed work and taught her how to become a real runner, her 5K time dropped from a very respectable 20:30 to a very competitive 17:30. Still not as fast as Nesbitt, a 1996 Olympian in the 10,000 meters, Andersson was now fast enough to win some of the smaller, local races she entered.

Eventually, Lynne Andersson found time to write her dissertation on “Championing natural environmental issues in business organizations,” an examination of how “green thinking” individuals can persuade companies to address environmental issues despite the fact that doing so may initially hurt the bottom line. She received her Ph.D. in 1996, by which time she’d relocated to Philadelphia, in what could be described as: “corporate social responsibility.” (She had met her husband Stephen, as an undergrad at U.N.C.--after he bought her a shot of Wild Turkey at a bar-- and followed him north when he was accepted to Penn’s Graduate School of Fine Arts to study architecture, shortly after they were married in 1994.)

Just weeks after arriving here, Lynne entered the Philadelphia Distance Run. A renowned half marathon nationally, (Olympic Bronze Medallist and U.S. Marathon record holder Deena Kastor shattered the U.S. half marathon record at the 2005 Distance Run), she placed second in her age group (30-34). At the race, she met a number of local runners and began training with them. For several years, she ran with the Jenkintown Running Company. After daughter Brigit was born in 1997, Andersson ran incredibly well in the Distance Run, but felt she over trained (partly from lack of sleep due to a cranky newborn), and was never the same runner after that. “I was never going to come back as well, even though a lot of people actually get better after they have babies. You feel great right after you have a baby and your blood volume increases so much, so for very little effort you can get back to your normal time. The big thing is, can you sustain that? And I just couldn’t. I got injured and tired.”

In 1999, Zoe was born and Andersson's life went through even more changes. With all of the uncertainty and operations surrounding Zoe's first few years, running provided much of the same distraction that it did when she was trying to escape finishing her dissertation a few years previous. "Running was helpful. I didn't have enough wherewithal to really train during those times. I didn't race a lot, but I kept running. (Running with friends) definitely helped me get through all the stresses. It's a very social thing for me. Half of the people I've met in Philly are through my running."

Today, Lynne Andersson is an Assistant Professor at Temple's Business School, teaching courses in: Law and Ethics in Business; Organizations and Management Theory; and, Managing People at Work. Nearly a dozen operations—and numerous complications—later, Zoe, almost seven now, has been breathing on her own for over a year and is a typically happy first grader at Project Learn school in West Mt. Airy.

After spending a good portion of her life in hospitals, she has no fear of anything. She is by no means out of the woods though, as she may need up to a dozen more operations until her skeleton is fully-grown. There are still no guarantees, but, fortunately, she has inherited her mom's fighting spirit, drive and zest for life.

At 41, Zoe's mom is not as fast as she used to be, though she still wins her age group in many of the races she enters. However to be able to compete, and to see her daughter grow up and run around, play and swim like other children, is the best victory of all.



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