

The Tale of Woe & Triumph

By: Rhonda Cohen

I don't look like an athlete. At least not the image that folks used to have of youthful, slender and muscular athletes.

I am 52 years old. When I was young, not many girls were involved with sports and at my school; only track and softball were available. Then too, I was a chubby kid, so athletics were not my thing. Sure, I dabbled in the fitness revolution of the 80's, but felt self-conscious at the gym so my attempts were always short-lived. A little over two years ago, I could see 50 looming in my near future. Something happens when you turn 50. Some say it's a glimpse into your own mortality. Some people use that milestone year to buy their dream car or a stunning piece of jewelry. I, however, chose to attempt to get in shape. I have a young son, so that was a strong motivation. I stared at the scale and was overwhelmed at the number. That was very disturbing to me so I went to my doctor who gave me a stress test and gave me the green light to exercise.

At a charity auction I put in a bid for a one-month trial to Platoon Fitness. My bid was the winner and I enrolled in the program. The name frightened me, but I thought desperate times called for desperate measures. I nervously showed up at 6 a.m. at its location on the campus of the Haverford School. The instructor told me to take a warm-up run around the track. I wasn't able to run that far so he told me to walk around the track and then try and run a little around the corners. When I mastered that, he instructed me to walk the corners and run the straight-aways.

The workouts were intense but no one yelled critiques at me as I had expected they would. To the contrary, I was encouraged and motivated beyond what I thought were my limits. After a surprisingly short period of time I was able to jog around the entire track, albeit very slowly. When I first started, I read a book called "No Need for Speed" by John "The Penguin" Bingham. He became an athlete as an adult and his philosophy is that you don't need to be any particular size, age or body type to get in the game. And slow is just fine. It was very helpful to hear that message.



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I met a lot of wonderful, new people dedicated to a healthy lifestyle who became my new social group. They were interested in participating in charitable fun runs, and talked me into doing my first, The Jingle Bell Run for Arthritis (which I have), a few days before my 50th birthday. I was extremely nervous, but so excited when my friends sang Happy Birthday to me when I crossed the finish line. I couldn't believe that I had just run a 5k when that previous June I could barely even walk one loop around the track. This whetted my appetite, and the following March my buddies talked me into a 10k run. The race organizers were very nice and let me start a half hour before the official time. I would have felt badly having them wait for me at the finish line.

What was next? Training for the Broad Street Run of ten miles, eleven months after I first started exercising. I was petrified, but ran the entire distance (most people walk faster than my run pace) and I cried when I was able to cross the finish line. My only goal was to cross that line before the official photographer went home, but I covered my bases and gave a friend a disposable camera just in case. I did finish before the official photog went home, so I gladly bought a huge picture from his company.



No stopping me now! I bought a hybrid bike at a warehouse store and started riding. I began to swim a little in the winter. I had never heard of sprint triathlons before and then found a website www.beginnertriathlete.com where you can learn how to do them, ask questions and benefit from experienced triathletes. I decided to give one a try in June—just one year after I began exercising. This was a ½ mile swim, 15 mile bike ride and 3 mile run. I came in last, but I finished. However, at the awards ceremony, I heard my name called. I had won second place in my age division (there were only two of us)! I had certainly never won any athletic award in my life so this was a milestone day. Now I was hooked. I did another two triathlons and several races the rest of the season. I got two flat tires on a borrowed road bike during one race (was last, of course) and was actually third to the last on my final race of the year. I got a great collection of T-shirts, but no more awards. I missed that thrill. I was spoiled from my first event.

I had heard there was something called an Olympic Distance Triathlon and an inaugural race would take place in Philly. This meant "upping my game", getting a road bike and bracing to swim in the Schuylkill River. An interesting challenge, so I signed up. I received an e-mail from Cadence Performance Cycling that offered a Triathlon Class. Figuring that I really didn't know what I was doing, I showed up in sneakers, regular bike pedals and didn't know how to change gears on the bike. They certainly had their work cut out for them. Twelve weeks later, I entered that race with cycling shoes and a decent understanding of how to change gears and a tire. I didn't finish last! And, I even got an award for my division, Athena 40 plus (140-140 lbs and up.) I also ran the More Magazine Half Marathon for women 40 and older.

What the hell, a few more triathlons of various distances later, I signed up for a Half Ironman Triathlon. That's a 1.2 mile swim, 56 miles on the bike and 13.1 miles running. I knew I would be last so I handed the race director my ever-ready disposable camera to capture the moment. It was brutal and it took several days before I could actually walk with a normal gait again. But I got that medal and showed it proudly to everyone I encountered, even if I didn't know them.

In the meantime, I entered the lottery for the New York Marathon, not really expecting to be chosen because 75,000 people apply and only (only!) 35,000 are allowed to run. My number was picked and I became an official entrant in the 2005 New York City Marathon. I trained 9 to 15 hours a week throughout the summer. I had always wanted to run in a marathon before I was 30. That age came and went, but here, at last, I was. On November 6, 2005, I finished the NYC Marathon. It was very intense and not injury-free, but I crossed the finish line and got the same medal that everyone else received.

I can't tell you I lost 100 pounds in this journey. Although I've lost weight, I still am a large woman. I never was thin

and probably never will be. No, it's not easy lugging this body up a hill on my bike and I'm no gazelle on the pavement, but it can be done. All of my life I had an adversarial relationship with my body. But all you have to rely on in an endurance sport is your body and your mind so you have to count on your body to take you where you need to go. I could never have gotten to this point by myself. I didn't grow up having a coach that said, "you can do it" or parents cheering for me on the sidelines during any game. So the little "you can do it" voice was not implanted within at an early age. I had to hear it from the outside. That still small voice is learning to talk louder though. I have had an amazing set of friends, trainers, family members, coaches and supporters who believed in me, even when I didn't think I could do it. I always got words of encouragement, congratulatory e-mails and cards and guardian angels who showed up to cheer me on at my lowest and weakest moments.

There are many others like me out there as well. Jayne Williams is the author of *Slow, Fat Triathlete*. The book is funny and informative. She also has a website www.slowfattriathlete.com. Michael Pate wrote a book, *When Big Boys Tri* and also has a website. John "The Penguin" Bingham, contributor to *Runner's World* magazine and author of *No Need for Speed* and *The Courage to Start* was inspirational to me. I had the good fortune to meet him at the New York City Marathon pre-race expo and he made me promise him that I would finish the race so others would see me and know they could do it too.

Know there are many cheerleaders out there—trainers, coaches, instructors, friends, books, websites, blogs and chat-rooms. There will always be better, stronger athletes (yes, I now use that word to describe myself) but I am racing alongside them and get to experience the same excitement.

Rhonda Cohen is an age group multisport athlete, an event planning coordinator and freelance writer whose work has appeared in many publications.

Do you have a Success Story to share about yourself or a friend? If you or someone you know has used multisport racing and training as a way of facilitating positive change in their life, or in the lives of others, we want to hear about it. Please submit your story to: SteveBrown@phillyfitmagazine.com