

Running After Baby

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I will bet that some of you were able to run throughout the course of your pregnancy and jump right back into your pre-pregnancy speed and endurance level. That was not my experience, however. I resorted to walking by the fifth month of my pregnancy. When my doctor cleared me to run again, I was fifteen pounds heavier than before my pregnancy, and I felt like I was starting all over again.

Nearly six years ago I could not run a quarter of a mile without stopping to walk. It took me over two years to get to the point where I could call myself a runner—to enjoy long runs and to feel comfortable running. After my son was born, I feared it would take another two years to get back to that place, and I was not so sure I could be that patient again.

Those of you who watch the HBO Series “Big Love” may have seen the episode this season where Nicki, the second sister-wife, describes what is needed to keep their marriage going—“sticktoativeness.” Sticktoativeness is exactly how I would describe what is needed to get back into running after having a baby. It is a slow and humbling experience at first, but I have discovered that you can get past a difficult start if you stick to it.

My running coach, who happens to be my husband, says that running is as much a mental challenge as it is a physical one. That is especially true when you train for a marathon. You have to teach your body to keep going when it is tired and hurting. You have to ignore the voice inside your head that tries to convince you to walk. It is the same when you start running again after a baby or a prolonged injury. You have to tell yourself to stick with it, even though you are disappointed with your lack of speed and stamina (not to mention lack of sleep with a new baby). If you can do that, you will improve more quickly than you could imagine. It is hard at first, but not unlike riding a bike, your body does remember how to run.

So, where do you begin? The best way to get started is to set a goal for yourself as soon as possible. Some may think it would be better to wait until after the baby is born to see how their recovery progresses or how they adjust to having a baby. Before I had my son I thought that way. Now, I do not. As I mentioned before, my husband is my running coach. He is also a very focused runner who always has a goal for himself to keep motivated. When I was about seven months along, my husband sent me an email at work that basically said he wanted to run the Park City Marathon and that he thought I should run the half marathon. Before I knew it, we were registered. At that moment, I was committed to running a half marathon just six months after my son was to be born, and I had to make sure I could make it to the finish line.

In a bit of a panic, I asked my husband to help me come up with a plan to get running again. I knew that I would not be able to start running right after my son was born because I was having a scheduled cesarean section. My doctor told me that he would not clear me to run until six weeks after the surgery. With my son due to arrive February 9, I set a goal to get back to running three miles without stopping by May 1. After that, I was to follow a sixteen-week half marathon training schedule developed by my husband. My first long run was to be five miles. My longest run, three

weeks before the race, would be thirteen miles. Although it seemed daunting at the time, I had my goal race in place and a training plan to get me there.

Those first six weeks went by very slowly, but I learned that it is important to let your body to heal before you start running again. If you start too early, it can hurt a lot more and you can even injure yourself, prolonging your postpartum recovery time.

My first run was more of a run-walk. I would run a few minutes, then walk a few more. Each time I started a run, I would start out too fast, attempting to run at my pre-pregnancy pace. Within a few minutes, I would discover that my lungs and my legs could not keep up and that my endurance level needed some serious improvement.

I was determined to stick with it. I would try to run at least four days a week, and I would always cover three or four miles, even if I walked a significant part of it. On April 23 I finally ran, although very slowly, three miles around Town Lake without stopping. As soon as I could run three miles at a time, I knew I could make it the rest of the way.

My first few weekend long runs were a mix of running and walking, but by the time I ran seven miles at once I got to experience that breakthrough feeling that happens the first time a runner ventures into longer distances. There is something about running more than six miles. It is hard to explain, but your body seems to adjust to the longer distance and you end up enjoying your run more than you could enjoy a three to five mile run. I first experienced the feeling when I trained for my very first half marathon. I did not think I could experience that feeling again, just as you can never experience finishing your first marathon again, but I was pleasantly surprised to discover that there was at least one benefit to starting all over again.

I am now a week away from my peak run of thirteen miles before I begin my taper for the Park City Half Marathon. I still walk a little on my long runs, especially with the high humidity we are experiencing this summer. I still do not have the speed I used to have. My weekly track workouts are a lot slower than they used to be. But my endurance level is improving with every additional mile I run, and I am enjoying running once again. I hope that I can at least get back to where I was before my pregnancy. I know that I can get to the finish line in Park City.

Yes, I have already set my next goal, and this one was my idea. I am registered to run the Goofy's Race and a Half Challenge at Disney World in January 2008. My ever supportive coach and husband will be running with me. Our older children have already staked their claim to the finisher medals. I know that as long as I stick to it, I will make it to both finish lines in January. Then I will have to find another goal.