



RUNNING THROUGH IT

During the lowest points in their lives, three ordinary women became runners and emerged stronger in body, mind and spirit.

By Jayme Otto



FROM LEFT: JENNIFER HOWIE, COURTNEY JOHNSON, MARY PFLUGH

Courtney Johnson's sister had been having a tough year. Laurie, who'd gotten divorced and given birth to a stillborn baby boy, had turned to alcohol to numb her depression. The entire Johnson family felt Laurie's struggle, but recently, it seemed that the trend of painful events was starting to turn around. Laurie had just begun a detoxification program, and Courtney could finally let a day go by without worrying about her sister. Then, only weeks later, Courtney received a call with the worst news imaginable: Laurie was dead. The autopsy revealed that her sister had died from a seizure directly related to the detox.

In the weeks following Laurie's death, Johnson's mother and surviving sister told Courtney that they would dream at night of the caring, thoughtful blonde. But Johnson never did. She felt confused, and desperately wanted to connect with Laurie. It didn't help that she had extra time on her hands,

having recently completed graduate school. "I was really angry at whoever or whatever had taken Laurie from us," Johnson says. "And I had way too much time to fume over it."

Room to Heal

In the past, when Courtney was struggling, she would call Laurie, who was twelve years older and more like a second mother. This absence of support left Courtney spinning as she sought an outlet for her anger. "I tried throwing myself into my work, but it didn't help," Johnson says. "I needed something more. I needed to get out and *do* something."

An undergrad athlete a decade earlier, Johnson had always been drawn to sports. Laurie had attended most of Courtney's hockey games, and even showed up at her first triathlon in 1999 wearing a handmade t-shirt that proclaimed: "My Little Sister is a Triathlete." Fueled by those memories, Johnson laced up her running shoes,

something she hadn't done in years.

It was on the trails that she felt her sister's presence again. "When I ran, when I was out there all by myself, I felt like I could talk to Laurie," Johnson says. "So I did. About work, my relationship, little problems, everything."

A More Powerful Version

Through running, Courtney was able to vent her emotions and to connect with her sister. The physicality of the sport helped her to escape her own head. "What running did for Courtney was to provide space for a healthy grieving process," says sports psychologist Sharon Chirban, Ph.D. Courtney was also able to recapture a part of herself by finding the athleticism she'd lost in grad school. In that way, Johnson not only reconnected with her sister on the trail, but also with a more powerful version of herself.

The positive effects Courtney gleaned from running were no coincidence, says John Martinez, M.D., a sports medicine physician and part of



Courtney Johnson



Mary Pflugh



Jennifer Howie and family

the medical staff with USA Triathlon. Recent studies have shown endurance exercise has an effect on depression similar to that of antidepressants or cognitive behavioral therapy. Although the reasons for this are largely unknown, Martinez says, “We do know that exercise rebalances neurotransmitter levels in the brain which stabilize mood. It also decreases cortisol, helping the body better process stress.”

Reshaping Dreams

Running’s depression-blasting abilities are exactly what pulled Mary Pflugh through her grief. The 30-year-old had suffered multiple miscarriages while trying to conceive her third child. Doctors said her eggs were so abnormal that it was risky for her and the potential baby’s health to continue trying. For a woman who’d gotten married at the age of 23 intending to have a big, happy family of five, this was an unbearable disappointment.

Losing her family dream was too much for the stay-at-home mom, particularly following the emotional roller coaster of her miscarriages. “I suddenly didn’t know my purpose, or what the next step in my life was going to be,” she says.

Pflugh felt like a failure. “My body was designed to have a baby, and now it suddenly just couldn’t,” she says. “It was like I was less of a woman.” The fact that she already had two healthy children wasn’t a comfort, nor was the knowledge that the health issues were not her fault. Pflugh fell into a depression, struggling to get out of bed in the morning. She turned to food for solace and quickly gained 30 pounds.

Stunned by her dramatic change of appearance and saddened by her lack of energy to play with her children, Mary joined a gym on a friend’s

recommendation. She thought it could help her lose the weight, but she never expected that it would also change her mindset. After a spinning class, Mary was approached by a coach who encouraged her to join the Mighty Tri Girls Team in order to train for a triathlon. Feeling like she didn’t have any other goals or direction in her life, Pflugh agreed.

The Next Step

She started running in 2009, targeting a sprint distance triathlon in 2010. Naturally athletic, a former basketball and softball player, Pflugh immediately took to the sport. She placed fourth in her age group at her first race, and then placed first in her second. The very same year, Pflugh completed an Olympic distance triathlon and a half marathon.

Pflugh currently has her sights set on a full marathon, and eventually an Ironman. “I realize now that when I was so low, what I needed was a goal, something to give me a sense of accomplishment, to take out my emotions in a positive way. I needed a win, or a victory, something to prove to myself that I could be successful.”

With a renewed sense of confidence, Pflugh continues to train because it makes her a better mother, wife and person. She’s now physically tough, but in other areas, she’s learned to be gentler. Instead of looking at

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her pregnancy challenges as a failure, she focuses on the amazing fact that against all odds she has two beautiful, healthy children. When Pflugh runs today, she leaves her iPod at home, preferring to listen to the sound of

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her feet on the earth and her breath. “I feel at peace,” she says, “and I’m comfortable in my own skin again.”

Finding Fulfillment

By becoming a triathlete, Pflugh redefined herself as a woman. “Through running, Mary found another way that her body still served her after her failed pregnancy,” says Chirban. The psychologist explains that women often have difficulty making the time to exercise. “Women assume that being a caretaker, a mother, a nurturer, is more fulfilling than doing something for themselves, and that’s not always the case. . . the positive self-reinforcement they’ll get from being active, fit, and healthy translates into an even bigger positive in marriage and child-rearing.”

Reaching The Brink

Two years ago, Jennifer Howie was a wife and mother who defined herself solely as a caretaker. Consequently, the 32-year-old was obese, depressed and on the brink of divorce. Howie had positioned herself in the shadow of her athlete husband and his new coaching business. Preferring to stay in a support role, she managed the finances, ran the household and took care of the couple’s young son, Grable. Jennifer believed she didn’t have time for her own fitness, and that it didn’t matter. She’d never really been successful at anything, sports or otherwise. In her mind, she was mediocre. Craig was the star, and their son the rising star.

All of her energy went into taking care of Craig and Grable. “I literally wasn’t doing anything for myself,” Jennifer says. She felt the full stress of balancing the family’s finances after

Craig left his teaching position to pursue coaching full time.

“We were just covering the basic necessities in the beginning, and I was worried that if I changed our lifestyle or cut back, he would feel like he had to give

up his true career dreams to better support us.”

Jennifer used zero-interest credit cards, cash advances and balance transfers to keep them afloat, racking up anxiety and debt. When she could no longer hide the fact that they were living beyond their means, Craig was frantic. Jennifer was fed up—and pregnant with the couple’s second child. “The timing was terrible,” Howie says. Furious at each other, the two spent a tense few months contemplating divorce.

Active Roles

When Craig was struck by a car on a training ride, the two reconciled in the hospital room. “I knew that I had to step up,” Howie says. “I needed to be able to take a more active role in my marriage and within my own self, especially when there were difficult things to communicate.”

She decided to start with a goal that seemed manageable—her weight. She chose running as her weight-loss tool because it was something all her own, different from Craig’s triathlon pursuits. Jennifer set a goal to complete a half marathon in 2009, and Craig helped her put together a training plan. Howie was startled to discover that support was best when it went both ways, and that her husband was just as capable and interested in nurturing her as she was him.

“Running was really clarifying for me, on so many levels,” Howie says. “It put me in control. Once that happened on the trail, I was able to emulate the same attitude in other aspects of my life.” She lost 40 pounds, achieved zero debt and finished her first half

marathon in just over two hours. In the process, she reconnected with both Craig and herself.

Running for Redemption

While training for her first marathon last fall, Jennifer overheard her seven-year-old tell a friend that his mommy ran 21 miles that day. “His friend was like, ‘No waaaaay,’” Howie recalls. “It was a huge moment for me when I realized that I could be the one to inspire my kids, not just the parent in the background.”

Jennifer was running for redemption, according to Chirban. She discovered that it was an effective tool for creating positive changes in all areas of her life.

The key to Jennifer, Mary and Courtney’s success is that running was only one piece in their healing process. Not a crutch, obsession or escape, but a healthy outlet. “Running provided them with the power they needed to run through their problems,” Chirban says. Today, these women are not defined by the tragedies they’ve experienced. They are mothers, runners, professionals, sisters, athletes, wives and survivors.

THE SCIENCE OF SURVIVAL

While running’s effect on mood and mental well-being may seem like magic, it’s really just simple brain chemistry, according to Shawn Talbott, Ph.D., nutritional biochemist and author. When immersed in a stressful state, women experience elevated cortisol levels, decreased testosterone and malfunctioning neurotransmitter activity. This can result in depression, fatigue, decreased immune system function, mental confusion and excessive fat-storage. “Our studies have shown a 30 percent increase in vigor (a measure of mood, energy level and mental focus) with an exercise intervention,” Talbott says. “In that way, taking up running can turn someone’s life around.”