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## The loneliness of a marathoner's wife

VIRGINIA HEFFERNAN CONTRIBUTED TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL PUBLISHED SEPTEMBER 25, 2007

This article was published more than 14 years ago. Some information may no longer be current.

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I'm thinking of starting a support group for partners of runners called Coping with Your Loved One's Benign Addiction (The Endless Marathon).

We would meet monthly - perhaps biweekly during race season - to share our creeping losses: stimulating conversation giving way to mind-numbing race stories ("and then I put the other foot in front"); old friends losing ground to new running buddies; sleepy morning sex replaced by vigorous interval training.

My partner began his running career five years ago. It started innocently enough: Seeking a distraction from cigarettes, Roger volunteered to help out with the cross-country team at our son's elementary school.

A few mornings a week, the two of them would strap on their battered runners, jog down to the school and spend an hour with the other early risers. At the school bell, Roger would wave to his Grade 2 charges and run around the block a few times to get his heart and lungs pumping before work.

Then, on a day like any other, the M-word slipped from his tongue.

"I want to run a marathon before I turn 40."

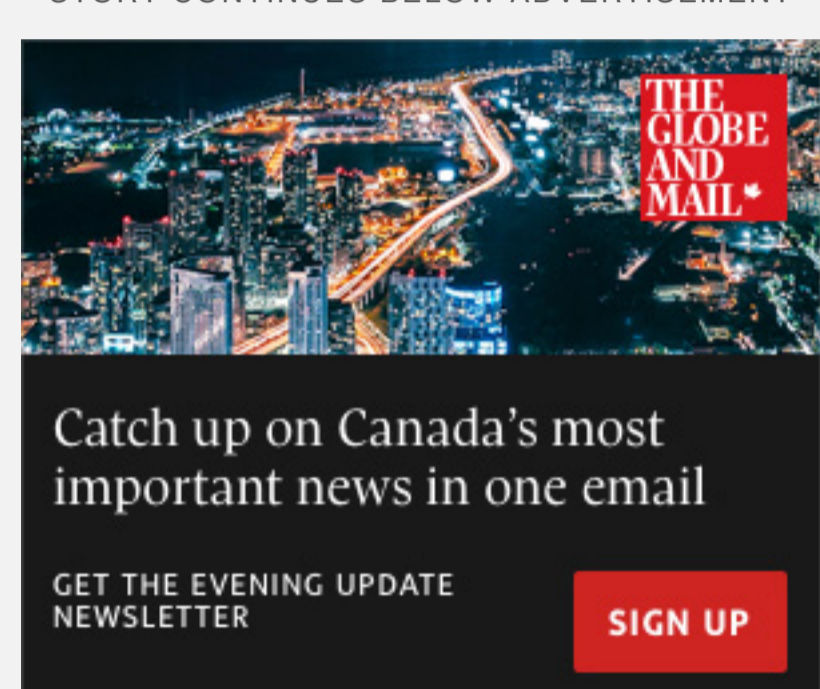
Just one. To prove he could do it. I was all for it. I was his most enthusiastic supporter. I even bragged about him at the dog park.

"Did you know that Roger is in training for a marathon?" I asked one of the dog walkers who, judging by his lanky frame, might be a runner himself. Just uttering the M-word made me feel important, part of an elite club.

His answer took me by surprise.

"Ooooooh, watch out," he said, wincing. "A friend's wife ran her first marathon a few years ago and now she's never around. She runs several a year - Boston, Chicago, New York, London. She spends all her free time either racing, training for a race, or travelling to or from a race. It's a dangerous sport that way."

STORY CONTINUES BELOW ADVERTISEMENT



"I'm not too worried about that," I replied confidently. "Roger's not the obsessive type."

Fast-forward five years. Roger trains six days a week and is in the top 2 per cent of Canadian marathoners. Last year, he placed 23rd in the masters division (over 40) of the Canada Running Series. He runs two sub-three-hour marathons per year and has a schedule of shorter races - 5ks, 10ks, half-marathons, relays - that would put most of us in a wheelchair.

Sometimes, when it's very hot, he runs so fast he loses consciousness.

Other times, I've caught him - a shower man by nature - lazily soaking in a tub of ice cubes to sooth the inflammation in his legs.

He has gone the distance in Toronto, Ottawa, Boston, Chicago, and along Cape Breton's Cabot Trail. Bibs from every race he ever ran are pinned to his office wall like tails on a donkey. Tacky wooden plaques line his bookshelf, reminiscent of the bedroom scene from one of those movies where the favourite son, the athlete, has met some tragic end.

His bedside table is a leaning tower of running how-to volumes, including the weighty *Lore of Running*, a 930-page tome that makes me laugh whenever Roger tries to balance it on his knees. That table was once stacked with his favourite literature: Barnes, Coetzee, Lessing, McEwan.

Among these bedside gospels is *Personal Best* by the late George Sheehan, who is described on the book jacket as the "foremost philosopher of fitness." Sheehan drew parallels between runners and alcoholics who overcome the drinking demon in four major ways: modifying behaviour, substituting dependencies, increasing religious involvement, and forming new relationships.

"The running body modifies its own behaviour," according to Sheehan. "Running then becomes a substitute dependency, an addiction that has positive rather than negative effects. It becomes a religious experience that gives renewed hope and self-esteem. And it bestows on each runner a new circle of similarly minded, non-judgmental friends."

Give me a break (the non-runner says, rather judgmentally). I liked Roger just the way he was and so, I thought, did he.

But it was the inspirational quotes that finally broke me. One afternoon, I wandered into Roger's office with his mail and there, flashing across his screensaver like urgent dispatches from heaven, were candy-coated mantras right out of a high-school year book: "Only those who risk going too far can possibly find out how far they can go."

"Dedication and commitment are what transfer dreams into reality."

Not quite the same as finding a note from a lover, but almost as devastating for someone wary of pat answers to life's complexities. My husband had become a running fanatic. And there was nothing I could do about it.

We'd come a long way from that day in the dog park.

But take heart: There is a flip side.

Running has given Roger a new clarity of thought and purpose that has served him well in both his personal and professional life. Maybe, just maybe, he'll be able to trick genetics and outlive his father, who died of a heart attack at 50. And if his new-found passion represents a mid-life crisis, it sure beats buying a motorcycle and/or chasing younger women.

Not to mention the rock-hard body.

So, to anyone whose partner is discovering running religion, let me say this: Eventually - because there's no other choice if you want your relationship to survive - you'll learn to draw the ice baths, launder the sweaty socks and swallow the mantras. You may need therapy to get there but, one (training rest) day, you'll wake up, wrap your arms around your brand new man or woman and say to yourself: "My runner is fit, happy, passionate, fulfilled, loving, and still here."

What more, really, could anyone ask for?"

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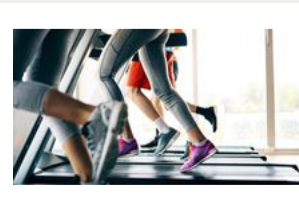
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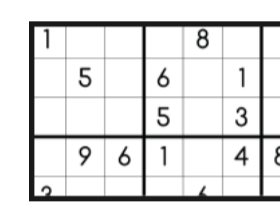
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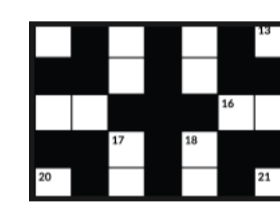
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