

Going the Distance

*These days, people of all shapes, sizes, and fitness levels are actually finishing marathons.
However humble your workout goals, you'll want to know their secrets.*

By DARYN ELLER

April 17, 2000 (Venice, Calif.) -- Struggling along at mile 25 of last October's Marine Corps Marathon in Washington, D.C., Ruth Gursky heard the organizers announce that anyone who didn't make the seven-hour cutoff time -- just minutes away -- wouldn't get a medal. So Gursky, a New York attorney in her mid 40s, summoned her reserves and picked up the pace -- only to find a big Marine blocking her path. "I wasn't about to let all my hard work be wasted," she says. "I said, 'Move it!' and pushed him out of the way." With an official time of 7 hours and 12 seconds, she got her medal.

The Marine wasn't the only obstacle between Gursky and that finish line. "I'm a little chunky," she says. "And I've had two knee operations." What's more, she'd been seriously injured twice during the past few years: once in a fall down subway stairs and once in an automobile accident.

But though she seems an unlikely candidate for finishing a 26.2-mile race, Gursky is among a growing number of neophytes who are swelling the ranks of marathoners. "The spectrum of ages and body types now entering marathons has definitely widened," says Ryan Lamppa, a researcher for the U.S.A. Track & Field Road Running Information Center. According to Information Center figures, the number of people completing marathons nearly doubled from 1989 to 1999, jumping from 250,000 to 435,000. Many marathons have now extended their cutoff times to seven, eight, and even nine hours so that people of all abilities can finish.

Still, whether it takes seven hours or nine, a marathon is no walk in the park. How do people like Gursky do it?

It's not that they've stumbled onto some magical exercise potion. Rather, they're relying on some tried-and-true techniques that can help anyone struggling to establish and stick with an exercise habit.

For Gursky, one of the most important elements was having workout partners. Months before the Marine Corps Marathon, she joined Jeff Galloway's Marathon Training Program, which provides coaching and sets up group workouts around the country. Galloway, a former Olympian, promotes a run/walk approach to marathoning that, because it's easier on the body, has proven to be a good alternative for people who might not otherwise be able to go the distance.

"I couldn't have done it without the group," says Gursky, noting that there's more camaraderie than competition among the members. "They motivated me and I motivated them." Adds Lamppa, "Training groups are one of the biggest factors behind the marathon boom. I haven't heard of one training group that doesn't have a success rate of 90% or higher."

Indeed, reams of research shows that having buddies to work out with is a crucial element that keeps people moving. "Over and over again, studies have found that one of the factors influencing whether people will become active or continue being active is social support," says James F. Sallis, PhD, a professor of psychology at San Diego State University who studies exercise motivation. "Having people around to talk to while you work out and who are encouraging can be very motivating."

Exercise partners, Gursky found, also make it harder to blow off a training session. "This is a girl who never sees 5 a.m.," she says. "I cherish my sleep more than money, but I got up and out every morning to train because of the group." Indeed, while workout partners may be sympathetic to your struggles, they won't necessarily make it easy for you to give them the slip. "If you don't show up, they'll be calling and emailing you," says Victoria Seahorn, national director for Jeff Galloway's Marathon Training Program. "If you're going to have pressure, that's the best kind."

Another reason for Gursky's success is that her exercise group also provides coaching. Under the watchful eye of a coach, you're more likely to improve your technique than if you were training alone. And you're more likely to train sensibly -- which is especially important for beginners who are at particular risk for injury. Sallis' research, in fact, has shown that injuries are the number one reason people quit exercising. So anything that can keep you injury-free -- whether you're training for a marathon or simply trying to maintain a three-day-a-week cycling habit -- can make a big difference.

Having a specific goal can be helpful, too. Gursky's was that 7-hour, 12-second date with destiny last October, but a goal doesn't have to be quite as lofty as a 26-mile marathon. It could be anything from losing weight to getting strong enough to walk five miles in an hour. Yet it's also important to make your goal a moving target, says Sallis. "The danger is that once you reach the goal, you'll lose interest," he says. "Ideally, you'll use a goal to help you get started, then find something along the way that inspires you to make it a habit."

That, in fact, has been the case for Gursky. She still works out with her running partners, and instead of resting on her laurels, she plans to run the Chicago Marathon this coming October. "When I crossed that finish line, I was totally exhausted and totally fulfilled," she says. "I am total proof that anyone can do it."

(Editor's Note: Daryn Eller is a freelance writer in Venice, Calif. Her articles have appeared in Health and Cosmopolitan magazines and many other publications.)