

Introduction

I round the corner and head back to where my supplies are, glancing down to make sure the tourniquet around my thigh is holding up. I've been fighting for nearly four hours. I notice strangers eyeing me warily, and I press on. This must be exactly how Rambo felt... if he was real, and if he was bandaged up because he'd split the upper inside seam of his yoga pants wide open on mile 13 of a 20-mile run... like I just had.

I'm not fighting in the jungles of Southeast Asia, I'm marathon training. And the gaping hole, dangerously close to revealing my unmentionables, chafes in an unfortunate location.

I'd tell you this is the only embarrassing horror story from my more than ten years of running, but that'd be grossly incorrect. I've tripped. I've come in last. I've watched bubbles cover the sleeves of my jacket at the end of a rainy group run, after my washing machine played a cruel joke and didn't rinse my clothes appropriately. I've freaked out when I met someone's pet snake on a trail. I've vomited during a race. *Twice*. But I'm here to tell you that it's possible to keep going, even when running doesn't come naturally. And I'm here to tell you why it's worth it to keep going in this crazy sport.

I'm what is sometimes lovingly referred to as a "Back of the Pack'er." We're the ones who feel the nips of the race sweepers at our heels, threatening to wipe us off the course for not finishing in time. We are the *casual* runners, as opposed to the *competitive* runners. *Casual* makes it sound like it's my choice. Like I'm just keeping things casual with running. Like running and I sometimes see other people, because we're non-committal like that.

I didn't run track growing up—in fact, I never even ran a mile without stopping until college. I ran my first 5K in 2002, just because a U.S. President was running it. But somewhere along the way I became addicted. Road races, trail races, obstacle courses—I've tried them all. I've completed runs in every distance category up to a full marathon, and yet I still struggle to call myself "a runner," because I don't look the part, I'm not consistent, and I'm definitely not fast.

I'll admit that I probably like running races because I'm a "Goldfish Poodle." This is a term my friend Amy and I came up with to describe my general state of being. There is a myth that goldfish only have a three-second memory span, and so every lap of their fishbowl is like seeing the world for the first time. I'm typically moving so quickly through life that I feel that way, too. I'm easily excited and love to find fun wherever possible, which also makes me seem like a hyper poodle. The term Goldfish Poodle was born to describe me in the frequent moments when I Have No Idea Where I Am, But I'm Excited About It.

I often feel that way in the middle of races.

So, yes, one reason I keep running might be that my "goldfish" brain forgets how much of a pain the last run was. More than likely it's because my "poodle" brain craves the adventures that happen during training and racing. Days-long relays, obstacle courses involving fire and barbed wire, races at night, races where you wear tutus. (Fact: that can be *every* race, if you want it to be.)

Some adventures can be intimidating, but it's still fun to conquer something new. Plus, if nothing else, after you go through something challenging you end up with great stories. And once you've had one race adventure, you end up wanting that feeling again, so you sign up for more.

The excitement, the fun, and promise of a good story later are a big part of why I keep doing races. But there's more to it. Some part of why I keep running is practical—I have to train if I'm going to run in a race. And, believe me, I need a variety of tricks to keep myself out there. But a bigger part of why I still do it is the rewards I get from running, and from the running community.

Running has helped me deal with coworkers and break-ups, has taught me what I'm capable of physically and emotionally, has introduced me to some fascinating people, and has taught me how to accept support. Of course, it's also gotten me electrocuted....