



Rachel Barnes

This is a story not of loss but of gain. Although it has been a few years since I joined Purdy's Wharf Fitness Club, I don't have an incredible loss to detail (inches or weight). Of course some inches and weight have been shed, but it's what I've gained that makes the difference: friends, cheerleaders, a sense of accomplishment, patience, better balance and mental and physical strength are all side effects of the last three years. In the end, those things are more important than weight loss, etc.

Growing up on a farm in Cape Breton meant that there was no need for a structured exercise regime. My parents were hippies who came to Cape Breton to "live off the land". This meant that for the first 18 years of my life, we didn't eat anything that wasn't raised or grown at home or didn't come from the health food store. In addition, farming is a physical job and as a result, I was very healthy and fit. Then I went to university. The dreaded "freshman 15" became 30.

I was a single mom in university and used that as excuse when the topic of exercise came up. Most days it was all I could do to manage school, home and baby before I fell into bed at night. I told myself that it was more important to do the best job I could at parenting and that there'd be time for "me" later.

I didn't join a gym under after university. Although I did manage to shed some of the weight, I wasn't very committed. The years between ages 24 and 32 slipped by and while I weighed more than I wanted to, it wasn't yet out of control, I thought. At age 27, I was diagnosed with exercise induced asthma and allergies. Now that my daughter was older and I could begin a more regular routine, I latched on to the asthma as an excuse. It was easier not to take care of myself then it would have been to change. I kept telling myself that people still liked me so what did it matter what my weight was or how tired and run down I was.

I joined Purdy's Wharf Fitness Club in 2009 at the urging of a co-worker. Despite liking the more intimate setting and enjoying the times I went, it wouldn't be until 2011 that I'd finally take charge and really change my life. At a routine visit, my doctor found a lump in my breast. At the same time, a friend and I decided that instead of walking to work that summer, we'd join the Running Room. We signed up for the Learn to Run Program. I had a biopsy done on the same day as my first running clinic. I ran anyway. Although I would eventually have a lumpectomy and find out that it was **not** cancer, it was the wakeup call I needed to take better care of myself. I ran all summer thinking about how different my diagnosis could have been and how much life had to offer. I swore I wouldn't let opportunity pass me by again.

After the Learn to Run program was over, we signed up for the 5k clinic. I remember at that point thinking how crazy it seemed that I'd be able to run 5 kilometres without dying. Although I was succeeding at running, I also realized that I was still very out of shape. I committed to getting back to the gym instead of just paying for the membership. I soon realized that what I needed to do was start doing was taking lunch time classes. One thing I did know about myself was that I functioned better in a competitive environment. And I soon realized that with the convenience of the gym being in the building where I worked, there was no excuse good enough to skip going. Late summer of that year found me discussing my weight gain with a group of friends. We vowed to make a change together. I was the heaviest I'd ever been. By Christmas I was 20 lbs lighter and felt great. I had more energy, better skin and was sleeping better. I'd also become enamoured of the lunch time classes at PWFC. The staff members are always prepared, engaged and energetic. I felt stronger after each session.

While completing the 5k and 10k clinics, I was amazed at the number of people cheering me on (at work, home, PWFC and at the Running Room). Not only my friends, but complete strangers seemed eager to

cheer me on. Locker room talk frequently turns to what we're all focused on accomplishing next. I can't begin to explain how much motivation that provided. Every cold morning run, sweaty lunch time class, extra snack skipped was partially powered by words of encouragement. This, for me is the best side effect of going to a small and personal gym like PWFC.

In the spring of 2012, I found myself having a conversation with a co-worker known for his healthy lifestyle. He told me that there was a new outdoor boot camp style session starting at the gym and that our firm would have its own class. His enthusiasm and encouragement convinced me to give it a try. I wanted to quit after 5 minutes. In my mind, everyone there was in great shape and exercise was clearly a major part of their lives. I struggled to keep up but knew that if I ever wanted to run more than 10k, I needed to cross-train. The boot camp provided a total body workout. Each and every week, our instructor Tammy showed up ready to challenge us. It was never boring and always painful (in a good way). She never lets us get away with slacking and it was exactly the format I needed. I started to see muscle in places there hadn't been any since I was a teenager. Again, I remember being amazed at how great it felt to receive (and give) encouragement to others in the classes. Eventually, I no longer felt out of place. I did the only thing I could think of and signed up for two boot camp sessions a week.

By fall 2012, talk at the Running Room had turned to half marathon clinics. I used to think people who did those things were crazy and now I was one of them! In January 2013, I began training with some friends for a spring race. It was harder than I expected and despite suffering a 6 week set back due to injury, I flew to Toronto on the first weekend in May. My time was slower than the goal I had set for myself, but I finished. Despite training with friends and getting stronger than ever at boot camp, I was mentally unprepared. I had under-estimated the power of having someone at my side the whole time. I was so used to my training runs and everyone at boot camp cheering each other on, that I struggled without that support system.

I came back from Toronto determined to run only for fun and to continue boot camp plus some lunch time classes/yoga. Although I enjoyed running over the summer, I soon found myself agreeing to a spring 2014 half marathon (runner's high is not a myth). I agreed to go to Colorado for the race (a mile above sea level). With a friend who'd already run 5 other half marathons. And who was a lifelong athlete. And, who ran way faster than me. We began a 16 week training program in January 2014 and although it was hard (this winter was the worst NS has seen in a long time), we stuck with it. We ran, went to boot camp, went to classes and talked and talked about the trip. We ran in silence, we ran sick, we ran tired, we ran together and alone and we ran happy and sometimes sad. We ran outside in the rain, snow and cold. We ran inside. We just ran. I bored myself and everyone around me talking about the race preparation, the elevation, and my goals for the race, and on and on. Once again, I felt the power of encouragement. Tammy kept challenging me at boot camp, my fellow boot campers kept encouraging me and my running partner never let me stop (even when I wanted to). As a result, I finished my second half marathon 15 minutes faster than the first one. I felt each and every friend I'd made at PWFC there with me, cheering me on, pushing me faster and harder, even when I wanted to quit.

The question now is not can I do it again, but where should I go to do it again (yes, I'm already choosing a race for next year)? There's always room for improvement and I'd love to shave another 15 minutes off my finishing time next year. These past three years have made me realize, not only that I can, but that I should. My allergies and asthma have all but disappeared and my weight has remained stable for the first time in my adult life. I've learned to balance my eating and exercise so I never feel deprived. My short term goals are to run a faster 5k and to tone my body more. My longer term goal is the hike Machu Picchu for my 40th birthday in three years. These are all very achievable goals, especially with the help of my PWFC family.