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FITNESS

The Breakup That Leads to a Fitness Breakthrough

What starts as a remedy for heartbreak can help people reach athletic heights they'd never considered possible



Paige Harley crosses the finish line of the Antarctica Marathon in 2018. She picked up running to help her get through a divorce. She hopes to run a marathon on every continent. PHOTO: JEFF ADAMS/MARATHON TOURS

By *Hilary Potkewitz*

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Paige Harley couldn't have guessed that the path to recovery from the end of her second marriage would lead to the South Pole.

The 49-year-old mother of three from Nashville, Tenn., turned to running as a form of therapy in 2016, as she had after her first divorce.

"I didn't know who I was outside a relationship. Running set me up to learn what I could do," says Ms. Harley, a mediator who helps families going through divorce. Then she read an article about doing a marathon on all seven continents. "It was about facing my fears. Do I like to travel? Do I like to do hard things?"

She completed the Antarctica Marathon in March.

Because of the annual buildup of stress couples face between Thanksgiving and New Year's, the holiday season is also often breakup season. The weeks before Valentine's Day are no picnic, either.

Though getting dumped can be a heartbreaker, it can also be a great motivator—to get in shape as a form of self-care, to branch out and try a new sport or to train for a previously unthinkable challenge.

"In a relationship, a large part of your identity is as a partner-to-whomever, and when that is stripped away, you can feel lost or isolated," says Greg Chertok, of Telos Sport Psychology Coaching in New York. "Training for something can fill in that empty spot of your identity. And it probably acts as a distraction, taking our mind off the misery."

Four years ago, Kristen Kurtz was newly separated with two small children in New Providence, N.J., trying to figure out what to do next. Her brother-in-law invited her to join a local Spartan obstacle course race. Though she'd always been athletic, "life happens, you have kids, running gets put on hold," says Ms. Kurtz, a 40-year-old communications executive.

But once she signed up for this new challenge, she says training became like church or therapy. She joined a new community that had nothing to do with her old life.

As her divorce was finalized, her training improved. It included trail-running, pull-ups and carrying sandbags and buckets up inclines.

"With divorce, you have more free time on your hands, and this was a great way to fill that in a positive way," she says. She even landed on the podium in her age group in a few Spartan races. In 2017, she started competing at the elite pro level and now serves as an unpaid ambassador for the sport.

Heartache isn't the only driver in post-breakup transformations. When Paul Ronto broke things off with his girlfriend in 2012, they were co-workers sharing a desk in the student affairs department of Colorado State University in Fort Collins.

It made workdays awkward. Looking for excuses to leave the office, Mr. Ronto started jogging. He was about 25 pounds overweight at the time and didn't own a proper pair of running shoes.

"A lot of days, I would work 'til noon and things got too uncomfortable, then go for a run

and not come back," says Mr. Ronto, now 35.

He signed up for the Colorado Marathon and



Kristen Kurtz competed in the Bonefrog Challenge obstacle course race in Wintersville, Ohio in 2017. PHOTO: BONEFROG

hed his time goal, crossing the finish in 3 hours and 31 minutes. "I fell in love with being out there by myself. Running turned into this saving grace for me," he says.

The following year, he and his ex, Stephanie, reconnected. She'd been running with a local women's running club. Discovering they ran at the same pace, they started doing races together, rekindling their romance.



Paul Ronto and Stephanie Ashley celebrate after running a half-marathon together in Moab, Utah in 2013. Mr. Ronto began jogging after they split up in 2012, but they got back together and eventually married. PHOTO: STEPHANIE ASHELY

“Running was what got me away from her, but it’s one of the things that brought us back together,” Mr. Ronto says. They married in 2017. Mr. Ronto now works for a running website.

Sometimes a breakup can feel like a loss of control, and getting through it is about managing those feelings, says Suzanne Lachmann, a clinical psychologist working on a book about breakups. “If you’re uncomfortable being alone, going to the gym is genius. If your house is an uncomfortable place, going for a walk is awesome,” she says.

After Chris Cucchiara’s girlfriend left him in the winter of 2016, he had trouble sleeping. The 30-year-old bartender felt so down-and-out after work at night that he sought out distractions, including training until 2 a.m. at a 24-hour gym.

He slimmed down and put on about 25 pounds of lean muscle. For added motivation, he entered his first bodybuilding competition, Natural Muscle Mayhem in Sacramento, Calif.

The transformation had a lasting impact: He earned his certification as a personal trainer and launched a new career.

“The breakup was totally a blessing in disguise,” he says. “Now I have a way better girlfriend, and I want to go pro as a natural bodybuilder.”



Angela Williams and her road bike completed the Ironman 70.3 triathlon in Chattanooga, Tenn. in 2017. A race half the distance of a full Ironman, it involves a 1.2-mile swim, a 56-mile cycle and a 13.1-mile run. PHOTO: REBECCA STEIN

Angela Williams had never been much of an athlete. “I did gym-based exercise,” says the 51-year-old paralegal and mother of two. But during her 2014 divorce, her home in Signal Mountain, Tenn., lingered on the real estate market. Neither she nor her estranged husband could afford to move out and their children were in local schools, so everybody stayed put unhappily. Ms. Williams started going on long walks just to get out of the house.

Walking turned into jogging to the mailbox, or to the next tree. “Physically I was becoming more fit and mentally I was better able to deal with the stress,” she says. The house finally sold. Then she was laid off.

“I thought, oh my gosh, I’m getting ready to be out on the street and I don’t have a job and my divorce is going to be final in a month,” she says. “So I started running more.”

At around that time, the Ironman triathlon race came to nearby Chattanooga, Tenn. Ms. Williams figured she’d check it out.

Watching the running portion of the race, she was stunned. “I had this image in my head of triathletes as these graceful gazelles floating down this sea of athleticism,” she recalled. “But what I was looking at was not that.” People of all shapes and sizes were sweating and struggling across the Walnut Street Bridge.

She joined a local triathlon club and started learning how to swim in open water and ride a road bike.

“My life was falling apart, plugged together with putty and screws and tape, but this Ironman was something that I could control,” she says. “I knew if I stuck to a plan that I could possibly finish.”

Ms. Williams has since competed in three triathlons, including Ironman Chattanooga 70.3—half of a full Ironman race—in May 2017. She found a new job and a new home. She credits Ironman with saving her life.

“I know it sounds dramatic, but every person gets to that point in their life that is the dark night of the soul,” she says. “Training kept me together.”

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