



The stress of fractures

By April Moore



Earlier this year, when I signed up for my first half marathon, friends and family asked lots of questions such as, How many days a week will you train?; What's your best mile time?; and my favorite: What's your post-race meal going to be? No one asked, What will you do if you get injured and can't run? I probably would have said, "I'll cross that bridge if and when I come to it."

Nothing prepared me for having to stand at one end of that bridge—three weeks before the half—when pain set in. Nine days before the race, and after five months of training, I stared, glossy-eyed, at the MRI of my left shin while my doctor pointed out the “good-sized” stress fracture in it.

Sure, I had a good cry. Okay, a few good cries. Laser-focused on training, I had run five days a week, read every running magazine and obsessed over proper nutrition with a fine-tuned fork. I even kept a spreadsheet chronicling my miles, times and calories-consumed. At thirty-six-years-old and having minimal running experience, I was proud of my PR of 9:39 per mile with nine-mile long runs under my belt. The ten-pound weight loss was an added bonus. I felt invincible. Nothing like an injury to show you just the opposite. Perhaps rigorous half marathon training proved overly ambitious, especially since I had only run three 5Ks in the previous—ahem—ten years.

Thus, the race would have been a major fitness goal for me. I had always enjoyed running a couple of miles every few days for exercise, but I was far from athletic—a word I never ascribed to myself. I envied

those who could run miles and miles; their long, lean muscles propelling them forward, making it appear like an effortless endeavor. Why not? I thought. Why couldn't I be one of them? The race would also serve as a bonding experience between my sister and me. We were going to train in separate states, cheer one another on through Strava and run that race together in California. For months, I envisioned us crossing the finish line, having our picture taken; our smiling, happy faces overriding any aches and pains we may be experiencing. In fact, during certain training races when my legs wanted to run back home instead of tackle the hill in front of me, that fantasy kept me going. I could zone out around mile six and plan what stylish, yet practical, hairstyle I'd sport that day, as well as what stylish, yet practical, outfit I'd wear. (No wonder the running gods reined me in a bit.)

Then the other running shoe dropped: My sister was out, sidelined by a nagging knee injury.

With plane tickets already purchased, a house rented, we decided to make the trip a family vacation. Still feeling bitter about having to forfeit the half, I said I didn't want to go near the race that morning, so color

me surprise when we woke that morning, walked from the rental to the coffee shop, and were stopped by a stream of runners midway through the race. I won't lie; part of me wanted to stick my foot out and trip a runner or two. Jealousy can be an ugly thing. Instead, I willed myself to clap and cheer them along as they zipped by, acknowledging they, too, faced their own uphill battle.

I still wasn't over it though. Back at home and in the gym, I became one with the elliptical for several weeks, staring longingly at those using the treadmills, wanting to approach them with my Eeyore face and say, “You know, I used to run. Got a stress fracture.” I even figured there'd be a T-shirt for the occasion so I could tell everyone at once. Jealously had obviously not left my side. While toiling away on the climber, I dripped beads of green sweat, wishing I could whittle away at my mile time some more. Driving around town, any time I spotted a jogger or runner, I'd automatically scowl and look away. And if I saw one more of those “13.1” stickers on the back of a car, I was going to lose it.

All right, I was taking this a bit hard. I needed to get over it and channel my envious energy into rehabilitation. With the help of a physical therapist, I've worked every day on strengthening my weak hips and

I continue to toil away on the elliptical, stair-climber or bike. I've learned that running wasn't going to make me stronger, nor would it make me the athlete I longed to be—at least not right now. Strength had to come off the track in the form of leg-raises, lunges and clamshells (and also from knowing and accepting the fact that I'm only human and well, now thirty-seven). Plus, I realized that the runners I so envied, had likely been at it a lot longer than I had. I continue to stare at the treadmills, but this time with determination, not with a pathetic desire, which I'm sure earned me more than a few strange glances from others at the gym. And I'm getting there. I'm nowhere near my PR, but I'm slowly working my way back, one slow mile at a time.

Before the injury, my fifteen-year-old and I had signed up for the Color Vibe 5K which took place two weeks after the half. Unfortunately, I couldn't run it with him, but cheering him on from the sidelines felt just as exciting and exhilarating . . . and I had no desire to trip any of the runners. I'd still like to run a half, but I've accepted that it may not be for a while. After two months of rehab and cross-training, I've gained more muscle and strength than I did after five months of running, which was what I was after in the first place. So, a picture of me eating my post-race meal can wait a little longer, and I'm all right with that.

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